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PROLOGUE

The blue-gray she-cat paced the clearing. Her long fur was unkempt and matted, and clearly had not been properly groomed in some time. It was a hard time for the whole of ThunderClan, and their leader couldn't be seen paying too much attention to her own appearance. She had to be focused on the needs of the Clan before her own, and to set a good example for the cats StarClan had entrusted to her.

She gazed up at the dark night sky, speckled with the stars of Silverpelt. She had been taught from a young age, as had every Clan cat, that each twinkling dot above her was a StarClan warrior, watching over her. As she gazed up at them now, however, she suddenly realized how far away they truly were, how distant they were from her. ThunderClan needed a sign, an omen that all would be well.

Unbeknownst to the she-cat, her paws had carried her to the edge of the clearing, where a large patch of ferns grew. Though they had suffered like all the forest during the recent leaf-bare, they formed a tunnel leading to a den set in a cave in the wall of the ravine that surrounded the clearing. This was the medicine cat's den.

As the she-cat registered where she was, she saw the ferns parting as another cat emerged. The newcomer was another she-cat, though with a very different pelt. This cat was a beautiful dark tortoiseshell. Her eyes widened as she noticed her Clan leader standing before her.

"Oh! Hello, Bluestar," she greeted the blue-gray she-cat with a respectful dip of her slender head. "What brings you to my den?"

"I suppose that StarClan guided my paws, Spottedleaf," Bluestar replied, returning the gesture.

"You're worried, aren't you?" Spottedleaf asked. "I can see it in your posture."

Bluestar would never have admitted it to any other cat, but the relationship between a Clan leader and her medicine cat was a special one. She inclined her head ever so slightly.

"Do not worry," Spottedleaf said softly. "Leaf-bare was hard on us all, but now newleaf is here. The forest is warming, and soon the prey will be running again. We will finally be able to put the hard times behind us."

Bluestar sighed. She knew that Spottedleaf was only trying to help, but she wasn't in a mood to hear any empty promises. "I know, Spottedleaf," she told the medicine cat, "but that's just it. Leaf-bare was hard on the Clan. We have lost so many strong warriors in these last seasons. And there are so few queens in the nursery. I find it hard to believe that everything will be so easy from here on."

Spottedleaf dipped her head. "I understand, Bluestar," she said. "But what I said is true. Things do seem to be looking up."

Bluestar sighed again. "I wish I was still young enough to believe that," she said. "But ThunderClan has seen so much loss in the past seasons that it is hard to believe that everything could be fixed so easily."

"There will be new kits soon," Spottedleaf meowed, still trying to reassure Bluestar. "ThunderClan will thrive again."

"Perhaps," Bluestar replied sadly. "But training our young to become warriors takes time. The Clan needs more strong warriors if it is to survive."

Bluestar had expected another optimistic answer, but Spottedleaf remained silent. She stared into the sky, and Bluestar followed her gaze. "Have you had a sign from StarClan?" she asked.

"Not for some moons, unfortunately," Spottedleaf told her, tearing her gaze from Silverpelt. Her amber eyes fluttered in the starlight as she stared into Bluestar's blue ones.

Bluestar sighed once more. "If there was ever a time when we needed a sign, it would be now. The Clan has endured so much loss

in these last seasons, and we would all benefit from a reassurance that things will improve."

Spottedleaf nodded. "I understand," she replied. "I would appreciate that more than any cat. But I have not heard a word from our warrior ancestors."

Bluestar returned her gaze to the sky, remembering the cats ThunderClan had lost and wondering if they had found their way there. She only had a few moments to reminisce before Spottedleaf gasped, rudely awakening her. Bluestar searched the sky for what could have surprised her medicine cat, and was just in time to see the tail end of a shooting star disappearing over the treetops.

Spottedleaf turned to look at her leader once again, and Bluestar could see the wonder in her gaze. "Was it a-" Bluestar began.

Spottedleaf cut her off before she could finish her question. "It was a sign from StarClan," she breathed, her awed whisper almost inaudible.

"Well?" Bluestar asked, impatient to know what the sign foretold. "What does StarClan have to say?"

"It is a strange message," Spottedleaf told her. "Fire alone will save our Clan."

"Fire?" Bluestar asked incredulously. "But . . . fire is feared by all the Clans! How could it possibly save us?"

Spottedleaf hung her head, looking uneasy for the first time that night. "I do not know, Bluestar," she meowed. "But that is the message StarClan has chosen to share with us."

"Was there more?" Bluestar pressed. "Was there more to the message?"

Spottedleaf shook her head. "StarClan speaks in riddles, Bluestar," she mewed. "Medicine cats have always known this. But they would not have sent us this sign if the prophecy was not about to manifest itself. We will know soon enough what it means."

"Very well, Spottedleaf," Bluestar conceded. "If StarClan have spoken, then it must be true. Fire will save our Clan."

But how? she asked herself. *Can it really be true? Fire is an enemy to all the Clans. And what will it save us from?* After all, the four Clans had been more or less at peace for many seasons. Bluestar didn't want to believe that anything would shatter that piece, but she had to believe that StarClan would not lie to them.

"What could it mean?" she asked. She did not realize she had spoken aloud until Spottedleaf answered her.

"I cannot say for sure," the medicine cat meowed. "Perhaps it has to do with the Sunningrocks?"

Bluestar doubted that. "That conflict has raged for moons. I find it hard to believe that it would require a StarClan prophecy for us to deal with it."

Spottedleaf hung her head again. "What other conflict could be coming?"

Bluestar sighed. She did not know. "You are right," she began slowly. "StarClan does speak in riddles. But we must believe that they are warning us for a reason. We must believe that fire *will* save our Clan."

CHAPTER ONE

"You there!"

Rusty whirled around, all his senses on alert. The heap of bulging, rubbish-stuffed Twoleg pelts beneath him wobbled precariously; for an agonizing moment, he was afraid it would collapse. He dug in his claws and held on tightly as the pile steadied itself.

Nearby stood a tight-knit group of six or seven cats. It was as random an assortment as Rusty had ever seen; there was nothing to tie them together save for the identical gleam of malice in each pair of eyes. As Rusty watched, they fanned out, surrounding his position in a loose half-circle.

A black-and-white tom, who could only be their leader, stepped forward. He was easily the largest cat Rusty had ever encountered: well-muscled and obviously well-fed, too, judging by his sleek yet battle-scarred pelt. Dying sunlight glinted off the teeth set in his collar. He didn't even need to unsheathe his claws to look menacing.

"Scram," he growled. "This scrapcan belongs to BloodClan now."

At the single word, Rusty's heart seemed to stop. *BloodClan.* It was a word he had heard before, breathed out on his father's last breath. It was a word he had been taught to avoid, to fear, to despise. *Beware of BloodClan,* he had always been told.

But he had always heeded the warning. BloodClan did roam the streets of the town, along with countless loners and housecats, but their territory ended two streets away. So why were they here now?

Refusing to be daunted, he leaped to the ground, bushing out his fur so as to appear twice his size. "You can't do that!"

"Yeah?" came the response. "Who says?"

"I do," Rusty replied. "I've always respected your territory. But I've scavenged from this scrapcan for a while now, and I think I would have noticed if it was yours."

The tom chuckled. He let his gaze roam over Rusty: his ginger pelt, his skinny frame, the meat on his bones only just beginning to return after the cold seasons. "It wasn't ours then," he snarled. "It is now." He walked a circle around Rusty, sizing him up. "What's a puny cat like you gonna do about it?"

Cackles and jeers arose from several of the other cats.

"Yeah, Bone!"

"You tell him!"

"Puny cat! Ha!"

By now, Rusty was beginning to feel afraid. *I'm only eight moons old —I can't stand up to these cats!* But he forced himself to remain calm and collected. If there was one thing street cats respected, it was courage.

He took a single step forward. "You can't claim the whole town!"

"We just might," the tom shot back. "BloodClan is growing, runt. We need all the territory we can get."

All the territory you can take, *you mean,* thought Rusty. Out loud, he simply asked. "What about the other cats? You're not the only ones in this town, you know."

The tom unsheathed his claws. "They'll be given a choice. They can join us and help make us strong, or they can suffer the consequences of resisting. It's the same choice we're giving you now."

Even as their leader spoke, Rusty was conscious of the other BloodClan cats creeping ever closer, their circle tightening around him. Soon, he'd have no chance of escaping unscathed.

Would it really be so bad to join these cats? he wondered. They

obviously enjoyed a healthy amount of prey, if this cat Bone was anything to judge by. As he looked around the circle, he saw that most of Bone's enforcers had the same lustrous sheen to their fur, the same satisfied smirk on their muzzles, and the same powerful muscles rippling beneath their limbs.

But he knew what BloodClan was like on the inside. His father had told him as much: kits ripped from their mothers' bellies the moment they were old enough to feed themselves, the old and the sick being ignored, any and all cats forced to fight pointless battles, and their savage leader Scourge claiming the best scraps for himself and his inner circle while the rest of his cats got precious few bites.

That wasn't the life for him. His father had done more than enough to convince him of that. So Rusty made his move, leaping into the air between the two skinniest BloodClan cats. One of them belatedly struck out, his claws aimed at Rusty's flank, but by then, his target was in the air.

Rusty's paws found cold, hard stone. For a moment, he scrabbled to gain purchase on the smooth surface. Then he was off.

"Stop him!" yowled Bone, enraged.

A wiry brown she-cat was first to give chase. She caught up to Rusty at the edge of the alley, slamming her paws down firmly on his tail before he could turn the corner to freedom.

Rusty's legs slid out from under him as he tried in vain to free himself. He shut his eyes as he went down, feeling the breath driven from his body. When he next looked up, it was to see Bone's claws inches from his nose.

"I'll take that as a no," the black-and-white tom growled. Pulling his paw away, he angled his ears toward Rusty.

The brown she-cat got the message. She let go of his tail, but she was on his back almost immediately, poised to get in as many good blows as she wanted.

Remembering a trick he had learned from his father, Rusty let

himself go limp. The cat on top of him lost her balance as Rusty launched himself into a standing position, throwing her off. As she lay on the ground, gasping, he hesitated only a moment before striking out with his claws extended. He closed his eyes as he felt them tear into flesh and heard the she-cat's yelp of pain.

This cat was stronger than him, he knew, but her lithe body made it easier to keep her pinned down. Tangled together in a spitting, hissing mass of fur, they rolled around the alley, each one striking out at the other. Rusty's pelt stung all over as though he was tangled in sharp Twoleg wire, but he forced himself not to falter. His mind raced, trying to recall the basic fighting tips he had been taught . . .

In the next instant, two huge toms had gripped him and dragged him away. Shoving him against the red stone wall of a Twoleg den, they stood over him as he lay dazed.

"Last chance, cat!" Bone called. "If you reject me now, I won't offer this again."

The hungry glint in Bone's eyes seemed to reflect the last light of the sun as Rusty's vision blurred. As he blinked, it slowly came back into focus. He was dazed, he realized, but no bones had been broken.

Bone's teeth were bared, and his long tail twitched back and forth with irritation. He was clearly tired of waiting for Rusty's response. He raised a forepaw and inspected his long, curved claws.

"You can't make me join you," Rusty snarled. "My father told me about you. He said you were nothing but bullies!"

Bone pushed one of the toms aside and stalked up to Rusty. He peered down at the younger cat with a new light of interest in his amber eyes. "Your father?" he asked. "And who was your father, kit? How would he know so much about us?"

"He was one of you once," Rusty shot back. He didn't like the hungry look in Bone's eyes, but answering the other cat's questions bought him that much more time. "He said he left you."

Bone's lips pulled back, showing his teeth in a wicked grin. "And did he look anything like you?"

"Yeah," Rusty replied. "Why?

"We knew your father," Bone told him. "He was born into our Clan, but he was never truly one of us. Jake was his name, wasn't it?" He continued without giving Rusty a chance to answer. "Yes, we knew him well. He ran off with one of those *forest cats* on some crazy adventure. That was his first mistake. Then, when he came back, he took a *kittypet* for a mate. He even tried to join her in her Twoleg den. But when that didn't work, he came back to us. He begged to be let back in, but he was a deserter. And we don't take kindly to those in BloodClan." He leaned down to look Rusty in the eye. "So tell us. After all that, where'd he end up? What became of him?"

It was almost too painful for Rusty to admit. "He died," he choked out. "Infected rat bites."

Bone let out an entirely mirthless laugh. "You see?" he roared. "This is what happens to cats who refuse to obey Scourge. Cats who defy BloodClan! One way or another, they end up *dead."* He locked eyes with Rusty. "So I'll ask one more time: do you really want to be one of those cats?"

"Never!" Rusty snarled. Seizing his opportunity, he dived forward, sliding under Bone's legs and dashing toward the street beyond the alley.

Two of the BloodClan cats, one gray and one ginger, made a move to pursue him, but Bone held them back with a lash of his tail. "No. Let him go. I want to see how long he'll survive."

"But you heard what he said, Bone!" The ginger tom's voice was a deep rumble. "Scourge won't be happy if we let him get away."

"Patience, Brick." That was Bone again. He let out a purr. "Scourge will understand. He had it out for Jake, and I think he'll be just as excited as me to play this little game with Jake's son."

The gray tom let out a disbelieving snort. Bone cuffed him around

the ear.

As Rusty fled, the black-and-white tom's voice rang out behind him. "You can run, but you can't hide! We'll find you! And we won't waste time chatting when we do!"

Rusty just ran, and he didn't stop running until he had reached the other end of the small town. Out of breath, he ducked into another alley. Panting, he peered out to see if he had been followed.

The street was clear of cats. A pair of Twolegs turned the corner and walked right past Rusty's hiding place. Another walked by in the other direction. A dark gray monster roared past, its glowing eyes lighting its path, but no one took any notice of Rusty.

As the last of the daylight faded from the sky, Rusty's belly growled, reminding him of how long it was since he had last eaten. He had meant to scavenge from that scrapcan before BloodClan had interrupted him, but he hadn't been able to do so. That was all right, though, he thought. There had been nothing to eat in there anyway. BloodClan was welcome to it.

Still, he wished he could have gotten his paws on *something*. This alley had no scrapcan and no stuffed pelts either. There weren't even any rats. But there was no time to find another place. What mattered now was being careful and remaining hidden.

At the end of the alley was a damp, overturned wooden container, likely left by some Twoleg or another. It lay in shadow, under the overarching roof of a Twoleg den. It would be a good place to keep watch while remaining unseen.

Rusty silently crept the few steps over to the box. The inside looked comfortable enough—reasonably dry, but bare, without any sense of softness or warmth. Still, he would have to take it. It was all he had.

At first, Rusty sat up alertly, keeping his tail and paws tucked under him. His scent trail would still be fresh, he knew; BloodClan could easily track him. But he had chosen his spot well. From this vantage point, he could see any intruders long before they saw him.

The moon rose higher in the sky, and Rusty's yawns became more frequent. His anger had long since faded, and fear had taken its place. *Were they right?* he wondered. *Will I end up dead—like my father?*

BloodClan was certainly vicious enough to make it happen. Rusty's experience with them had made it clear how small and weak he was. His father had died before he could give him much proper training, and he had stood no chance against them. Bone's "game" was all that had saved him.

But it was not long before his mind gave in to his body, and he sank soundly into sleep.

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Rusty stiffened. Something was nearby. He heard it again: the rustling in the brush that signaled the nearness of his prey.

Keeping his eyes closed, he drew in a long, slow breath, savoring every scent. His mouth watering in anticipation, he unsheathed his claws—only to find soft earth beneath his paws.

Rusty's eyes shot open. *Where am I?* This musty leaf litter was nothing like the hard stone of the alley where he had curled up moments ago.

It didn't matter. There was still prey to be had. Drawing himself up, he refocused all his attention on the hunt. The creature was still nearby; he could feel it. There, in that bush!

Rusty dropped instinctively into a crouch. Slowly he crept forward, setting each paw down as lightly as a falling leaf, acutely aware of the light breeze blowing away from his prey. *It won't notice me until it's too late.*

Just as Rusty was tensing his muscles to pounce, a fat droplet of water fell from the sky and landed on Rusty's nose. Forgetting his hunt, he glanced up in frustration to the sky, to the stars shining above him.

Another drop hit his nose; his whole body trembled in a shiver. A

heartbeat later, he found himself startling awake. He was back in the alley. The water was dripping down from the rooftop above him.

So it had been a dream. It was a dream he had had before. Every time, he would get closer and closer, but he could never make the catch. As if to emphasize his failure, his stomach rumbled louder than a Twoleg monster.

And what made it worse was thinking of BloodClan. They, more than anything else, were the reason he had gone so hungry for so long. In the few days since Rusty had fought them in the alley, they had expanded the boundaries of their territory for three whole streets toward this end of town. Rusty had stayed as far from them as possible, just as he had done when they had been no threat, but it had cost him some of his best sources of food. Even if he never saw another BloodClan cat in his life, nothing was likely to change. Either he would starve, or they would claim the whole town and kill him along the way.

Or maybe there was another option.

Drawn all at once by some strange emotion, Rusty stood and padded to the end of the alleyway, where a wooden fence separated him from the forest beyond. If he craned his neck, he could just see the tops of the massive oaks.

Rusty leapt, clawing his way up to the top of the fence. He wobbled slightly before he found his balance and sat looking out at the view. The half-moon floated in the sky, surrounded by stars; its light seemed to turn the branches to silver. For a moment, Rusty felt an inexplicable calling, as if his paws longed to step down from the fence and into the wild . . .

"Hey there."

In that moment, the connection was broken. Rusty whirled around, half in shock, half in anger.

Balancing on the fence nearby was a small black-and-white kitten,who looked younger than Rusty- six moons at most. "I haven't

seen you around here before," he mewed. "Do your housefolk know where you are?"

Housefolk? Rusty was taken aback. Then he noticed the collar hanging around the kitten's neck. Of course. This cat was a housecat. He looked so sleek and fat that Rusty knew he couldn't be anything else.

"I don't have any housefolk," he replied, making a conscious effort to keep his tone casual. *I don't want to talk about this.*

"But you're wearing a collar."

Rusty growled. Of course this idiot cat had to remind him. Suddenly awkward, he raised a forepaw to scratch at the leathery band around his neck. Many times before- just like now- he had managed to work a single claw in between the Twoleg material and his skin and tug, but all the collar ever did was tighten.

It had obviously been made for the kitten he had once been, not for the growing cat he was now. If he didn't get it off, the day might well come when it would be so tight he wouldn't be able to breathe. He could never remove it on his own; that would require the help of another creature. But he had no Twolegs anymore, and his father had died before it became a problem.

He let his paw drop back down to the fencetop. "I don't have housefolk *anymore*," he amended.

"What?" The other cat clearly didn't believe him. "Who shelters you? Who feeds you?"

Rusty glanced back toward the Twoleg scrapcan he had scavenged from the previous day. The kitten followed his gaze.

"You can't seriously eat that!" he exclaimed. "Don't you know that they only put the bad stuff in there? Take my advice, find yourself some nice housefolk. You'll know what real food's like soon enough."

"No, thank you," Rusty meowed. His mind was already flashing back to his earliest days with his mother and his littermates, before they

had all split up. "I'm doing just fine."

"I've seen cats like you before," the other cat told him. "Cats without a real home. But never one so young." He gazed out over the fence. "Do you live in the forest?"

"No," Rusty said. *If I did, why would I be here?* "I live here, same as you."

"I knew a cat who went into the forest," the kitten went on. "At least he says he did. He told me how he caught a robin there. But I don't believe him. He's been fat and lazy all his life, even before he went to the vet."

"Great," Rusty mewed. He had given up trying to sound interested; the other cat didn't seem to care.

"I'm Smudge, by the way," he said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Rusty," Rusty replied. He wanted this kitten to stop talking so he could go back to sleep.

To his relief, the kitten turned away and began to walk back along the fence. "Maybe I'll see you around here again," he meowed over his shoulder.

Fat chance. Rusty gave a curt nod and turned away. With the other cat gone, he could go back to staring into the woods. As he did, he could feel it again: as if his very spirit was already there, in the forest, and all his body had to do was join it.

But he couldn't. Not yet. He was only eight moons old, after all. He still had much to learn about survival. Perhaps, when he was older, he could finally leave this place. But right now, there were too many memories holding him back.

But the thought of BloodClan made him reconsider. He half turned to leap up onto the fence again, as if he could simply leave everything he had ever known, but it was too big a step to take. *BloodClan will have to stop* sometime. *They can't take over the entire town. Something, or some cat, will put an end to it.*

But even as he told himself that, for some reason, he just couldn't believe it.

Rusty made himself busy, clawing together loose, discarded Twoleg pelts for bedding. But the conflicting feelings churning in his stomach would not go away. Only when he had curled up and sunk back into sleep did he finally escape them.

CHAPTER TWO

Three chapters in over a year? I see this as progress.

But seriously, sheesh. I promise y'all I'll stop being lazy . . .

. . .

. . .

One of these days.

Graypaw arched his back in a good long stretch, doing his best to stifle a huge yawn. He knew it was an honor for any cat—and much more so for an apprentice—to be chosen to patrol alongside the Clan leader, but did it *have* to be the dawn patrol?

He shivered. The morning mist still hung low among the trees, encasing the forest in a damp cloud as dark as the apprentice's own gray pelt. The only sound was that of the light breeze stirring the brush and branches, and the faint paw steps of the cats ahead of him. Graypaw gazed upwards, hoping to catch a glimpse of the sun, but he could make out nothing. *Great,* he thought. *I don't even know if it is dawn yet.* It would be just like Lionheart, he decided, to make him get up before he had to.

Graypaw closed his eyes, wishing he were back in the apprentices' den in camp, with the breath of his denmates warming the air. His nest there had never seemed so cozy . . .

"Wake up, Graypaw."

Graypaw startled as the breath of some creature tickled his ear. His eyes shot wide open; he looked around him, for a heartbeat still hoping that he would find himself back in his den, but instead seeing only the darkness of the early-morning forest. Taking a wary step back, he blinked until he thought he could make out the shape of a muscular golden-furred tomcat standing a fox-length away.

"Lionheart!" he gasped. "How long was I—?"

Graypaw's mew trailed off as Lionheart didn't immediately respond. His mentor's expression was unreadable through the fog, but he felt he had a good idea of what it was. Lionheart was not as harsh as some of his fellow senior warriors were known to be, but he knew perfectly well how to express his disapproval when he wanted to. Besides, Graypaw's own embarrassment at being called out cut deeper than any stern words ever could.

"Only moments, youngster," Lionheart grunted at last. "Though I might still say it was a few moments too many." Graypaw dipped his head in shame as the golden tabby went on. "A warrior must always remain vigilant. Prey could slip through his claws, and then his Clan would go hungry. Or worse, if an enemy came onto their territory, they might find themselves at a disadvantage that could cost them a battle. If even one Clan cat is unable or unwilling to do his duty, the others will only be weaker for it."

A lither, smaller shape moved up beside Lionheart as he spoke. This was Bluestar. She gazed impassively at Graypaw, and finally joined in the conversation when his mentor had finished.

"Lionheart is quite right," she meowed. "ThunderClan needs its warriors to be strong and alert at all times, especially now. So many of us are gone now . . ."

Her voice trailed off, wistful and regretful at the same time, and it seemed to be a long time before she continued.

Graypaw waited patiently for Bluestar to collect herself, not wanting to interrupt whatever she was thinking of. Only a few moments passed before she seemed to stir, remember where she was, and try to put some light back into her eyes.

"Lionheart has told me good things about you, Graypaw. I brought you with us today to observe your skills for myself. Tell me, what can you scent?" she asked.

She's changing the subject, Graypaw realized.

Graypaw was a young cat, one who had only been born at the end of the last greenleaf, but he could still remember some of the cats who had died during the cold seasons. By the time Graypaw had been old enough to leave the nursery, many of those cats had been lost to sickness, starvation, or conflicts over territory. These days, ThunderClan had precious few warriors left to defend its borders.

It was Bluestar's job as Clan leader to reassure her cats that all would eventually be well again, but in that moment he found himself wondering how much she herself truly believed that. *If that's what being a Clan leader is like, I'm not sure I'd ever want the job.*

But for now, Bluestar was still the leader, and she had given Graypaw a task, so he decided he should probably get on with that.

He raised his head obediently, closing his eyes and parting his jaws to taste the scents that lingered on the still air. At first, he tasted only the damp mist, and the scents of his two Clanmates nearby. Somehow, however, he doubted that either of them would be impressed with that fact. Then a stronger stench found its way to him, and he let it bathe his nostrils, rolling it around on his tongue before turning to his leader.

"Pine sap," he told her. "And fresh-cut wood. We must be near the Treecutplace."

It was Lionheart who answered him. "Indeed we are, Graypaw."

Graypaw opened his eyes and saw that the mists were beginning to burn away as sunlight shone through. Suddenly he could indeed make out the shapes of the stacked tree trunks and square wooden dens of the Twoleg Treecutplace. In this part of the forest, the Tallpines, the pale hairless creatures seemed to enjoy harvesting the trees that gave it its name. By the end of every greenleaf there were always at least a few new stumps to be found, though the destruction never came so deep into the woods as to threaten the ThunderClan camp.

Meanwhile, Bluestar was speaking to Lionheart. "I see he knows our territory," she told him. "And his scenting skills are showing promise as well. I look forward to seeing him pass his warrior

assessment. StarClan knows it can't come too soon . . ."

Lionheart dipped his head at Bluestar's praise of his apprentice, and Graypaw looked away, both to avoid the other cats noticing him eavesdropping and because neither he nor Lionheart wanted to entertain Bluestar's last unfinished thought.

The Clan leader clearly didn't want to dwell on it too much either. She slowly whisked her tail across the earth. "We should move on. The borders will not check themselves."

"As you wish," replied Lionheart.

Graypaw hurried to keep up as the two older cats brushed through the undergrowth ahead of him. They slipped silently through the forest, pausing every so often to leave fresh scent markers at the edge of their territory. None of them spoke for a long time, except to direct each other to replace the markers where they had faded the most.

Throughout it all, Graypaw's mind kept wandering back to Bluestar's strange behavior. Obviously any good Clan leader would be worried about not having enough cats, but was Bluestar really so anxious that she couldn't help but let it show, whether to a senior warrior or to one of the Clan's newest apprentices? Bluestar had always been able to keep her composure whenever she encountered a problem, so perhaps their situation was worse than Graypaw had imagined. Still, he had to focus on what he could do about it—which unfortunately wasn't much—and for now, that meant ensuring ThunderClan had a strong border. If they couldn't keep other cats away by fighting, then they would have to hope their scents would do it instead.

At last, the patrol emerged from a clump of ferns and gazed out upon the Twolegplace. It was as daunting as Graypaw remembered from the first day Lionheart had shown it to him. The rows of stone dens were separated from ThunderClan's forest by a high wooden fence that seemed to run around the entire cluster. When Graypaw had once asked why the Twolegs needed such an obvious border, his mentor had explained that they were too lazy to mark a regular one each day with their scent.

The Clan cats moved along the fence, leaving scent marks on bushes and grass as they went. The whole time, Graypaw could sense small creatures hurrying through the long grass ahead of them; although he couldn't make out their shapes, their prey-scent was sweet on his tongue. His belly growled softly, as if to tempt him further, though he knew he couldn't eat until every cat in his Clan had been similarly fed. He clamped his jaws shut, which helped him ignore the rich smells drifting around him, and focused on renewing the scent markers.

All at once he became aware that the rest of his patrol had gone still. Graypaw did so himself, just in time to avoid crashing into his mentor's haunches. Gazing around him warily, he opened his mouth but could pick up nothing save for the usual forest scents.

Following Bluestar's and Lionheart's gazes, Graypaw found himself staring at the top of the Twoleg fence a few nests down, where a young ginger tom now stood.

The newcomer couldn't be much older than a newly-made apprentice such as Graypaw himself, seven moons at most. He wore a green collar around his neck, with a small golden ball attached to it that made a faint tinkling noise whenever the cat moved. The collar marked him as a kittypet, but his fur didn't seem quite as glossy as other Twoleg pets Graypaw had seen around this place. Were his Twolegs not feeding him as well as they should? The thought made Graypaw angry, but he didn't think about it for too long. It didn't matter how well-fed this cat was, so long as he didn't try to steal any of ThunderClan's rightful prey. He could keep eating Twoleg slop and those pellets that looked like rabbit droppings for the rest of his days, for all Graypaw cared.

But none of that was the kittypet's most noticeable quality, anyway. Even in the weak sunlight, there was no mistaking the young cat's color. His bright orange pelt seemed to shine like—

"Fire," Bluestar breathed.

Graypaw tensed, but the newcomer didn't seem to have heard her. In fact, he didn't seem to have picked up any signs of the ThunderClan cats. Quickly, most likely so as to keep it that way,

Bluestar gestured with her tail toward the undergrowth. All three of them hid themselves beneath a clump of arching ferns, watching and waiting to see what this stranger would do next.

As it turned out, though, the stranger did nothing. He simply gazed out distractedly across the forest. Graypaw watched the other cat closely, readying himself to act if he saw any signs of danger, but none came.

Suddenly, a rustle in the branches above him caught Graypaw's attention. Taking his eyes off the kittypet for a moment, he lifted his eyes just as a blackbird swooped from a tree and dived toward the fence. Apparently, it had seen something it wanted in the Twolegs' territory and was now trying to get it.

At once the ginger tom stiffened, rearing up and unsheathing his claws, only to miss his prey by a whisker. The bird darted past him in a dark blur and swooped down into the next Twoleg garden over. The kittypet made no move to stalk or chase it. He looked after it for a brief moment, as though he were considering pouncing on top of it, but in the end he shook his head and turned away.

All the while, the Clan cats only sat, watching in silence. Lionheart had only shown Graypaw the basic techniques for catching birds—he had preferred to begin by training with land prey—but Graypaw knew enough to see that the other young tom's swipe hadn't been bad at all. Who could have taught him warrior skills? And how could any cat with such an intimate knowledge of hunting consent to living in a Twoleg's enclosed den?

After a few moments, the ginger tom rose to his paws and leapt back down from the fence, thankfully into the Twolegplace rather than the forest. After a few more moments, Bluestar's patrol emerged from hiding and went about marking their border as they had been. All the while, Bluestar moved about with a slightly distracted air, as if she couldn't stop thinking about what they had all just witnessed.

Graypaw found he couldn't stop thinking about it either. *What was that about?* he asked himself. The way Bluestar had said "fire" . . . it was almost as if she'd been expecting to see that cat. But he was a

kittypet, and a young one at that. What business could any Clan cat —let alone a Clan leader—have with him?

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The rest of the patrol passed completely uneventfully. Bluestar, Lionheart, and Graypaw made their way around the outer edge of ThunderClan's entire territory, renewing any scent markers that needed renewing and keeping their eyes out for enemy cats who might have given them trouble. Aside from one small ShadowClan patrol, who acknowledged them with nods of strained politeness before hurriedly moving on, the only living creatures Graypaw and his companions encountered were forest prey, and their patrol wasn't hunting just then.

By the time Bluestar directed them back toward the camp, the sun was well on its way to its highest resting place in the sky. As the light streaming through the treetops had grown stronger, Bluestar's mood had seemed to lighten, and as they headed back to rejoin the rest of their Clan, she took a few moments to speak to Graypaw and Lionheart about how Graypaw's training was progressing.

"And you aren't facing any problems?" she asked Graypaw, once Lionheart had finished giving her a report on how his apprentice's hunting skills had developed.

"None, Bluestar," Graypaw answered. "Lionheart is a fantastic teacher."

Bluestar nodded her head. "As well he should be. I watched him grow from an inexperienced apprentice like you into the warrior he is today, you know. If you follow his example, I have no doubt you will become not only as proficient, but also as noble, as he is."

"You give me too much credit, Bluestar," Lionheart cut in. "You witnessed much of my training, yes, but surely you remember how many times I fell flat on my face in those early moons. Back then, I never would have thought I could grow to be a noble warrior."

"All cats have their good days and their bad days," Bluestar mewed. "It is how we react to those bad days that truly determines our

mettle. A Clan is only as strong as the warriors who are ready to support it. If one cat falls, they should know how to get back up, and the others must be ready to help if they need to. Do you understand, Graypaw?"

Her question caught Graypaw off guard. She had phrased it lightheartedly enough, but for a moment it had almost sounded like she had retreated back into her previous state of concern for the Clan's well-being. Even so, Graypaw found it easiest to answer the question and not ask his own.

"Er ... yes, Bluestar. I do," he stammered.

If she had noticed his brief hesitation, she didn't say so.

The patrol walked together in silence until they came to the ravine that housed the ThunderClan camp, with a barrier of thorns and brambles ringing it on all sides. A path of dirt and rocks led down the slope to a small gap in the camp wall, and this was the path that Bluestar, Lionheart, and Graypaw took.

The moment Lionheart emerged from the gorse tunnel into the ThunderClan camp, two small golden-brown blurs came streaking from a den in the corner to meet him. Caught off guard as they knocked into his side, the warrior stumbled over a loose pebble; he went down, his opposite flank hitting the dirt with a thud that knocked the breath out of him. His two golden tabby tom-kits, Brackenkit and Thornkit, stood triumphantly over him.

"We beat you!" Thornkit crowed. "Take that, intruder!"

"Brackenkit! Thornkit! What do you think you're doing?"

At the sound of the new voice, Graypaw looked up to see a graceful white she-cat bustling out of the nursery entrance from which the kits had appeared. Graypaw recognized her as Frostfur, the kits' mother and Lionheart's mate. Behind her, he saw their two she-kits —the gray Cinderkit and the ginger-and-white Brightkit—peeking their wide-eyed heads out to observe.

Lionheart pushed himself to his paws, gently brushing the kits back

with his tail. "No harm done," he assured his mate as she gathered them to her. "Kits will be kits."

Looking none the worse for their mother's scolding, the two kits struggled free and scampered around their father's paws, looking up at him pleadingly.

"Can you play with us now?" Brackenkit asked. "Frostfur says she's tired, and Brightkit and Cinderkit don't want to play warriors."

Lionheart chuckled. "What's the rush? You'll all have plenty of time to practice being real warriors."

"Then can you take us into the forest?" Thornkit asked.

"We'll stay with you!" his brother chimed in. "We'll do whatever you tell us."

Lionheart's face grew more solemn, and he bent his head to look his sons in the eyes. "The warrior code says kits must stay in camp for their first six moons. The forest is simply too dangerous for me or any warrior to keep you safe from everything."

Crestfallen, the kits shared a sad look. Thornkit's eyes lighted on Graypaw, as if he had just realized the apprentice was present. "Graypaw gets to go out," he growled, scowling rebelliously.

"Graypaw is more than twice your age," his mother reproved him. "He's big enough to defend himself. A small scrap like you wouldn't even make one bite for a fox or a badger."

"But—" Brackenkit began.

All at once there was a scuffling of paws on dirt near the camp entrance. All the cats in camp turned their heads in time to see a powerful dark brown tabby running in, followed shortly by his small black apprentice. Tigerclaw and Ravenpaw.

Those two had meant to hunt near the Sunningrocks. Even in the coldest weather there was prey to be found there. For Tigerclaw to return empty-handed meant either very poor luck . . . or trouble. From the grim set of Tigerclaw's muzzle, Graypaw could tell it was

almost certainly trouble.

"Bluestar!" Tigerclaw panted, his eyes roving around the camp. "Where's Bluestar?"

"I'm here, Tigerclaw." The Clan leader padded into the center of the camp to meet him.

"We scented RiverClan cats at Sunningrocks. On our bank of the river."

Tigerclaw went on speaking, but those first words were all Graypaw heard. RiverClan at Sunningrocks . . . It couldn't be. Those fish-breaths hadn't tried to make a move for that territory since before leaf-bare, when he had been a tiny kit. If they kept this up now, there would undoubtedly be a battle, maybe more than one. Cats would get hurt—or even killed.

Before he even knew he was doing it, his paws had turned him away from his mentor's side and back towards the gorse tunnel. He took one glance around him; every other cat was too distracted by Tigerclaw's news to notice him. Willing his legs into motion again, he bounded out into the forest and turned onto the trail to Sunningrocks.

He had to find Silverpaw.

CHAPTER THREE

Ravenpaw stood panting beside his mentor as their Clanmates' expressions shifted from shock to outrage.

"RiverClan? Can't those fish-brains keep their grubby paws off our territory?" Mousefur exclaimed incredulously.

"Of course not." Only Darkstripe could make such a languid drawl still ring with sarcasm. "After all, they think it's *their* territory."

The story of Sunningrocks was one every ThunderClan kit learned in the nursery. Long ago, at the dawn of the forest, the river that formed the border between ThunderClan and RiverClan had run on both sides of the rock pile, so that only the strong swimmers of RiverClan could reach it. Then, one day, the water on the ThunderClan side of the border had mysteriously dried up, leaving the forest cats with a clear, dry path to the rocks. ThunderClan had taken this as a sign from their ancestors that the rocks should be theirs, but RiverClan hadn't been ready to abandon their ancient claim.

The debate between the two Clans had become like a thorny bramble bush, unable to be easily uprooted or untangled. Where words had failed, they had turned to claws. Moon after moon, the rocks had been contested, yet neither Clan had ever managed to convince the other to back down.

Currently, ThunderClan held claim to the rocks. They had maintained that claim through the last two leaf-bares, ever since their former leader Sunstar had simply strode into RiverClan's camp and announced his intention to remark the borders. He had defended his actions by observing that ThunderClan was better able to hunt among the rocks, a skill they would need when prey became scarce during the cold seasons. All the forest cats had been surprised when RiverClan had respected the reasoning and stayed away from the rocks for so long. Ravenpaw himself hadn't been born yet in those moons, but he realized now just how much that

particular defeat must have rankled the rival Clan.

Ravenpaw found his attention drifting away as the Clan meeting dissolved into bickering. He knew what the senior warriors would say. Tigerclaw would advocate for swift retaliation, and he wouldn't be without supporters. Cats like Whitestorm and Lionheart would advise caution, and Bluestar would more than likely agree. It would be unwise for ThunderClan to be too aggressive over what could still turn out to have been an innocent misunderstanding.

As the argument went on, Ravenpaw noticed only one other cat in the clearing who wasn't entirely focused on it.

Graypaw.

His fellow apprentice seemed uninterested in the debate, but not in the same way as Ravenpaw. Like their Clanmates, he had been startled by Tigerclaw's declaration, but he didn't look angry or offended like the rest of them. Instead, he looked almost afraid.

Ravenpaw could understand why Graypaw might be concerned. He himself had never liked the idea of fighting. But Graypaw had always wanted nothing more than to be a warrior in the service of his Clan. The thought of getting a chance to defend ThunderClan in battle should have excited him. So what was he so worried about?

Ravenpaw watched Graypaw out of the corner of his eye, careful not to let the other young tom know he was being observed. He saw Graypaw's eyes widen as the older cats spoke, until Graypaw suddenly turned around and dashed through the camp entrance into the forest.

Should I tell some cat? Ravenpaw asked himself. He let his gaze flick to the thorn tunnel, where he could just see the tip of Graypaw's tail before it disappeared, then to his mentor, who probably wouldn't appreciate being interrupted just then.

No, he decided, he'd leave it alone for now. It wasn't like Graypaw was breaking any rules: he knew the territory, and the warrior code didn't forbid apprentices from leaving camp without supervision.

In that split second of hesitation, the center of focus in the camp shifted to Bluestar as she leaped onto the Highrock, catching every cat's attention with a high-pitched yowl.

"Enough!" she called, putting every bit of authority she had into her tone. "I have heard all sides of this issue, and now I will need time with my senior warriors to decide how best to respond. Whitestorm, Tigerclaw, Redtail, and Lionheart, meet me in my den, please. As for the rest of you, I see that the fresh-kill pile is dwindling. Some cat ought to take out a hunting patrol."

"Right away, Bluestar," called Willowpelt. As the Clan leader disappeared beneath the Highrock with the cats she had summoned, the gray she-cat waved her tail to beckon a few of the cats nearest her. Longtail and Runningwind joined her as she padded through the gorse tunnel and out into the forest beyond.

The cats left in the clearing drifted apart, heading to their dens or the fresh-kill pile. Ravenpaw stood still for a moment, wondering what he should do. With his mentor already busy, he had no training to look forward to right then. Besides, he had just patrolled half the territory. Hadn't he earned a rest?

Ravenpaw sat patiently as the queens and elders took their pick of the meager fresh-kill left over from the previous day. The warrior code dictated that those cats ate first, out of the honor they were owed for their services. Once there were no more cats left to take prey before him, Ravenpaw strode up to the pile and chose a mouse for himself. He gulped it down in only a few bites. The meat was a bit stale, given the time it had spent in the middle of the clearing, but Ravenpaw didn't feel sick, and he was glad to have some food in his stomach.

With nothing else left to occupy him, Ravenpaw decided to head for the apprentices' den and lie down in his nest. He rose to his paws and padded over. As he got closer, he could hear two cats inside having a lively discussion. The voice of his brother, Dustpaw, echoed within, followed by that of the Clan's only female apprentice, Sandpaw.

Pushing his way in through the den entrance, Ravenpaw sat in his

nest and curled his tail around his legs, glad for the moment of rest and doing his best to ignore his fellow apprentices as they jabbered on.

"They haven't directly challenged us yet," Sandpaw was saying. "Bluestar isn't that aggressive. She'll decide to wait, and that'll be it."

"She has to see what's happening!" objected Dustpaw. "RiverClan doesn't want us to have the rocks. They were only waiting until we thought we were safe. ThunderClan has to fight for what StarClan gave us."

"What do you think, Ravenpaw?" Sandpaw asked. "What should we do?"

Ravenpaw startled, surprised to be included. "Oh, I don't know," he responded weakly. "There'll be a battle, I guess."

Dustpaw flicked his tail across Ravenpaw's ear, causing Ravenpaw to flinch backwards and almost tumble out of his nest. "Stupid furball! Of course there'll be a battle! Those stinky RiverClan cats need to learn not to mess with us!"

Why can't they have learned already? Ravenpaw wondered morosely. *Why do we have to go through this so often?*

From his kithood, Ravenpaw had hated the idea of battle. He didn't think it made him a bad apprentice; after all, he still wanted nothing more than to provide for his Clan. He just thought there were ways to do it that didn't involve spilling so much blood.

Dustpaw and Sandpaw went on chattering, but Ravenpaw wasn't listening anymore. The thought of so many cats, with so many claws unsheathed to tear each other apart, made his stomach turn. *Perhaps I shouldn't have eaten that mouse.* He was thankful when Bluestar's voice echoed through the camp once again, summoning every cat back to the clearing.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather below the Highrock for a Clan meeting!"

The other two apprentices jumped to their paws and dashed off,

their tails twitching back and forth in excitement. Ravenpaw poked his head out of the den entrance, watching them join their mentors in the growing mass of ThunderClan cats. All eyes were on Bluestar, who had strode to the edge of the Highrock. Her sleek blue-gray fur shone in the near-sunhigh light.

With all the focus on her and her announcement, no cat noticed Ravenpaw hanging back as he took a place on the very edge of the gathered cats. He had hoped that Graypaw might have returned by then, so they could sit and listen together. But the young gray tom still wasn't in camp, and Ravenpaw began to worry.

Where did he go? Ravenpaw wondered. *If he stays out too much longer, he'll be in big trouble.*

But Ravenpaw couldn't dwell on his friend for long. The Clan leader was about to speak.

"I have heard the arguments of my senior warriors," she began, "and I have come to a decision on what we should do."

The ears of every cat in the Clan pricked up, the better to listen intently as Bluestar went on.

"While I trust Tigerclaw's report of the RiverClan scent at Sunningrocks, no cat has seen their warriors on our side of the border since we last reclaimed it. We cannot know whether this is a declaration of hostility or simply a wayward apprentice. Therefore, ThunderClan will not resort to battle at this time. We will be on our guard, but we will not confront Crookedstar or any of his cats yet."

The clearing rang with murmurs of approval as Bluestar took a step back from the edge of the Highrock. Their leader had made a wise choice, not to antagonize a rival Clan without evidence.

"But what if they do it again?" asked Darkstripe. "How many times are we going to let them get away with it before we do something?"

"I have thought about that as well," said Bluestar. "Redtail will lead a special patrol of warriors to watch the rocks tonight. If they spot any RiverClan cats on our territory, they will drive them away."

Darkstripe dipped his head and took a step back. Even he could recognize the wisdom in Bluestar's judgement.

"That is all I have to say," finished Bluestar. "ThunderClan will go about its business as usual unless RiverClan gives us reason to do otherwise."

With that, the Clan leader leapt down from the Highrock, and the crowd of cats dissolved once more.

Redtail padded up to Tigerclaw, beckoning with his tail to draw the dark tabby warrior a little ways away from the rest of the gathered cats. Ravenpaw angled his ears toward them, wondering what the Clan deputy had to say.

"Tigerclaw, I'd like you to join my patrol," Redtail said. "If RiverClan crosses the border again, I'll need strong warriors to push them back."

"Of course," Tigerclaw replied, his voice a low growl. "ThunderClan must be able to defend itself."

"Calm down," the deputy cautioned him. "It hasn't come to that yet."

Tigerclaw snorted but didn't object. Suddenly, his gaze turned toward Ravenpaw, who almost flinched backward in surprise. Had he been caught eavesdropping?

But Tigerclaw wasn't angry. Instead, a new light had come into his eyes, as though he had just had an idea.

"Should I bring Ravenpaw along?" he asked Redtail. "He's never been out of camp at night before."

Say no. Please, say no, Ravenpaw silently urged Redtail. He couldn't meet either cat's eyes, his mentor's or the deputy's, or they would surely sense his fear. Tigerclaw, as usual, seemed far too keen on the idea of fighting. Would he force Ravenpaw into doing something dangerous?

"Hmmm," Redtail mused. "He's still young."

"I've been training him for a moon and a half by now," Tigerclaw told him. "My apprentice can take care of himself. And this will be a valuable experience for him. He'll have to deal with night patrols or Clan relations at some point. Why not now?"

Redtail considered the argument, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. When he next spoke, Ravenpaw's heart sank.

"Very well," he said. "You make a good point. Ravenpaw can come with us. Still, his battle moves have yet to be assessed. If we get into any fighting, keep him out of it."

Tigerclaw sat back on his haunches, apparently satisfied. Ravenpaw, meanwhile, was anything but.

Ravenpaw gazed forlornly up at the sky, wondering whether StarClan had a sense of humor. He was almost certain they had to; after all, they had allowed ThunderClan's most skittish apprentice to be trained by its most bloodthirsty warrior.

Please let this end without fighting, he thought, hoping his ancestors could hear him. *Why can't all the Clans just get along?*

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The half-moon glowed on smooth granite boulders, turning them silver. The silence was broken only by the ripple of water from the swift black river and the whisper of trees in the forest beyond.

Ravenpaw opened his jaws wide in a yawn. He had been crouched beneath the bush for so long that his legs had begun to feel stiff, and there was a nasty itch along his spine where the leaves brushed against it.

His mentor gave a low growl from beside him. "Stop fidgeting," he said. "Do you want the enemy to know where we are?"

What enemy? Ravenpaw wondered. *We haven't seen any other cats since we got here. This whole mission is just a big waste of time.*

He didn't speak his thoughts aloud; Tigerclaw would only get angrier.

Trying his best to ignore his discomfort, Ravenpaw fixed his eyes on the pile of rocks. He knew he should be watching for any sign of RiverClan warriors, but he had too much else on his mind to concentrate properly.

Graypaw had returned to camp around sunhigh, not long after the uproar over RiverClan's trespassing had finally died down. Ravenpaw had hoped to question him in private, to find out why his friend had run away, but Lionheart had taken Graypaw out for hunting practice before Ravenpaw had had an opportunity.

Where did he go? Ravenpaw couldn't stop thinking about it. *It isn't like him to be so secretive. He's my best friend. If he was having problems, he'd tell me . . . right?*

But Ravenpaw didn't get much time to think. Suddenly, Tigerclaw stiffened beside him, bringing him back to reality. Ravenpaw followed his mentor's gaze, and it didn't take him long to see what Tigerclaw had seen. Something---multiple somethings---were moving across the river, their figures barely discernible in the dark of the night. The ripples they sent through the water were the only thing that gave away their position.

There was a stirring in the shadows, and from all around lithe dark shapes crept stealthily over the rocks---the shapes of cats. And there was no question about where those cats had come from.

RiverClan! Ravenpaw realized. *So it's true. There is going to be a battle.* His heart sank.

One of the newcomers, a bracken-colored tom, turned his head to face the spotted she-cat beside him. "You were right, Leopardfur. This was almost too easy."

"What did I tell you, Oakheart?" his companion replied. "ThunderClan can't stop us from taking these rocks."

So that was Oakheart, deputy of RiverClan, thought Ravenpaw. He gulped; Oakheart was well-known as one of the most formidable cats in all the Clans.

"Those lazy forest cats can't be bothered to get up from their nests," Leopardfur continued.

The warriors around her chuckled heartily.

"That's enough,' said Oakheart. "We left our scent on these rocks last night as a warning, and they haven't done anything. Now it's time to remark the borders, and show ThunderClan that they can't stand in the way of StarClan's will."

Tigerclaw looked to Redtail, and the deputy dipped his head. Redtail pointed his tail toward the rocks in a silent signal to his warriors, and the patrol leapt forward as one, halting only tail-lengths from the rival Clan.

"ThunderClan!" Leopardfur shrieked. "It's an ambush!"

Every cat tensed themselves for battle, and for one heart-wrenching moment, Ravenpaw waited to see which of them would make the first strike.

Unsheathed claws glinted in the moonlight. Wary eyes flashed. And then, as if on a silent signal, the warriors leaped at each other, and suddenly the rocks were alive with wrestling, screeching cats.

Tigerclaw leaped on top of Oakheart, pinning the RiverClan deputy to the ground and lifting his head triumphantly.

"Oakheart!" he growled. "How dare you hunt in our territory? The Sunningrocks belong to ThunderClan!"

"After tonight, Tigerclaw, this will be just another RiverClan hunting ground," Oakheart spat back.

Every other ThunderClan warrior had already flung themselves into battle, but Ravenpaw hesitated. This was exactly what he had been afraid of. He cast a glance at his mentor, still hissing angrily at Oakheart, then turned to look over his shoulder at the dark forest beyond.

A shrill yowl of alarm from Mousefur jolted Ravenpaw out of his thoughts. "Look out!" she called. "More RiverClan warriors are

coming!"

Ravenpaw and Tigerclaw turned to see several sleek wet bodies sliding out of the water below the rocks. The drenched RiverClan cats bounded silently up the shore and hurled themselves into battle without even stopping to shake the water from their fur.

Tigerclaw glared down at Oakheart once more. "You may swim like otters, but you and your warriors do not belong in this forest!" He drew back his lips to show his teeth as the RiverClan deputy struggled beneath him.

Mousefur cried out again. This time, the only sound she made was a desperate scream of terror as a wiry RiverClan tom pinned her flat on her belly and lunged toward her neck with jaws still dripping from his swim across the river.

Tigerclaw heard the cry and let go of Oakheart. With a mighty leap, he knocked the enemy warrior away from his Clanmate. "Quick, Mousefur, run!" he ordered, before turning on her attacker. Mousefur scrambled to her paws, wincing from a deep gash on her shoulder, and raced away.

Tigerclaw spat with rage as the RiverClan tom sliced open his nose. He lunged forward and sank his teeth into the hind leg of his enemy. The RiverClan cat squealed and struggled free.

Ravenpaw's head swiveled from side to side, taking in the scene around him. The two Clans had been evenly matched in number, but RiverClan's reinforcements had given them the advantage.

What was he supposed to do? Redtail had been very clear that he shouldn't get drawn into the fighting, but didn't ThunderClan need every warrior they could get? The idea of facing off against another cat terrified Ravenpaw more than anything. He had practiced battle moves before, of course, and he knew most of them well, but he had never had to test them against an opponent with more skill than the other apprentices.

As Ravenpaw debated, he backed toward the edge of the rocks, hoping he could get to safety before any cat noticed him.

From the top of the rocks, Redtail stared at the battle raging all around him. "Tigerclaw!" he yowled as his eyes settled on the dark tabby warrior. "This is useless! There are too many RiverClan cats!"

Tigerclaw leapt to his deputy's side. "No, Redtail. ThunderClan will never be beaten! This is our territory!" He shook his head impatiently, scattering the drops of blood that had welled around his muzzle.

"ThunderClan will honor your courage, Tigerclaw, but we cannot afford to lose any more of our warriors," Redtail urged. "Bluestar would never expect us to fight against these impossible odds. We will have another chance to avenge this defeat."

He met Tigerclaw's amber-eyed gaze steadily, then reared away and sprang onto a boulder at the edge of the trees.

"Retreat, ThunderClan! Retreat!" he called.

For a few moments, the clearing dissolved even further into chaos as the ThunderClan cats broke away from their enemies and ran for the trees. RiverClan's warriors stood still, stunned, unsure if they should give chase.

Ravenpaw had never been so relieved. He bounded across the short stretch of ground between him and the rest of the gathering patrol. There was only one cat missing.

Where's Tigerclaw? He's so strong, and he fought so fiercely. Surely he isn't . . .

Ravenpaw's heart stopped for a moment until he located Tigerclaw, silhouetted against the darkness of the forest. He stood halfway between the rocks and his patrol, looking back at the bloodstained battlefield. His face was grim, his eyes furious slits.

The brown tabby warrior's tail lashed in barely concealed anger as he watched the RiverClan patrol stretching themselves out on the rocks as they examined their wounds. Oakheart and the cats around him seemed almost confused, as though they couldn't believe the battle had been so easily won.

Then Oakheart yowled a jubilant cry, and all his Clanmates raised their voices and joined in.

Tigerclaw's muscles tensed as the caterwauling went on, as if he were tempted to leap straight back into battle.

"Tigerclaw," Redtail warned him in a low voice. "It's over . . . for now."

Tigerclaw spun to confront the deputy. "You can choose to be weak, Redtail, but I won't. If you're too soft to protect what's rightfully ours, some cat has to step up."

"I never said we wouldn't fight for the Sunningrocks," Redtail said evenly.

"Then why are we running away?" asked Tigerclaw.

"Mousefur is injured," said Redtail. "She needs to see Spottedleaf as soon as possible."

"Then send her back," growled Tigerclaw. "We don't need warriors who aren't fit to defend their territory."

"Look around you, Tigerclaw," said Redtail, and Ravenpaw could tell the deputy was losing his patience. "Continuing this battle would be pointless. We'd still be outnumbered even if Mousefur or Ravenpaw could join us. Bluestar won't let this stand. She'll send a larger patrol next time, and we will reclaim our territory."

Tigerclaw didn't seem convinced, but he raised no further objections. He and the deputy held each other's gaze for several seconds, Redtail staring impassively into Tigerclaw's bloodthirsty glare. At last, the dark tabby averted his eyes, breathing hard, and seemed to force himself to be calm.

"Very well," he said. "Let's go, then."

He no longer seemed angry, but something in his voice still chilled Ravenpaw to the bone. Tigerclaw had always been a little too eager for battle, but would his instincts lead him to disobey a direct order?

Surely he wouldn't try anything foolish . . . right?

Then the patrol was on the move again, and Ravenpaw was forced to follow.

- - -

So there you have it, folks. We are now caught up to the first book's opening scene. This is where it gets exciting .

Please keep the feedback coming. I know I'm not the most consistent writer, but seeing how much y'all love this story keeps me coming back to it.

See you in the next one.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rusty had had a long day. BloodClan had recently taken over two more scrapcans, and he had been forced to range even further from his usual scavenging grounds. And as if that weren't enough, the loners in the town had all become increasingly hostile as their food sources dwindled. Rusty had seen two cats whom he knew to be good friends nearly come to blows over a small strip of meat before they had reluctantly decided to split it in two.

How long can we go on like this? Rusty wondered. *Every cat is getting desperate, and desperate cats do desperate things. At this rate, BloodClan will win before any of them have to lift another claw.*

As Rusty made his way back to the alley where he had made his nest, a rustling from somewhere close by startled him. He spun around, tasting the air, but he couldn't detect any other cats around him. So it wasn't an ambush. That was good.

The sound came again, and this time Rusty traced it to a heap of Twoleg stuff piled up against a fence. The pile was too small, and too tightly packed, for anything much bigger than a mouse to have wriggled its way inside. Whatever was moving around in that pile, it could only be one thing: prey.

Rusty's claws slid out, and he passed his tongue over his lips as he began to salivate. Calling upon everything his father had taught him during their limited time together, he dropped into a slightly awkward crouch and moved to position himself downwind of his quarry.

He didn't have to wait long before he could make out the shape of a sizeable rat emerging from the other side of the pile. It scanned its surroundings but failed to notice Rusty hiding nearby. The rat squeaked once and began to skitter away.

Judging his moment, Rusty pounced, narrowly missing the rat as it suddenly dodged to the side. It took one look at Rusty as he whirled

around to pounce again and ran away. Rusty wondered whether he should chase it, but he had to decide against it. It was getting dark, and Rusty didn't want to run into any danger he couldn't see coming. Besides, rats were known for being vicious when cornered, and Rusty knew better than to go into battle without the element of surprise on his side.

Disheartened, Rusty turned in the other direction and set off again for his temporary shelter. He reached the alley as the sun was setting behind him, casting long shadows everywhere. Rusty wanted nothing more than to curl up in his nest and sleep for a whole moon, but he knew that the pangs of his barely satisfied hunger would keep him awake. Catching the rat would have more than made up for the terrible scavenging he had had that day, but Rusty had only ever learned the most rudimentary hunting techniques before his father had died, and none of those would have helped him against a creature that could fight back.

It wasn't fair, Rusty thought as he sunk down onto the Twoleg pelts he had laid out for bedding. How had his life turned out like this? Why was he, an innocent cat, forced to struggle to get by while BloodClan could bully the whole town into living under its rule?

Once, moons ago, the concerns of loners and rogues wouldn't have bothered Rusty one bit. He had been born as a housecat, living together with his littermates and their mother Nutmeg. However, once the kittens had been weaned and were old enough not to need their mother's milk, they had all been separated, each one taken to live with their own new housefolk.

Rusty had wound up in a tall den where many elderly Twolegs lived. He had belonged to one in particular, an almost completely hairless male. The Twoleg hadn't been able to move around much, and some days, he hadn't even been able to get up from where he slept. But Rusty's food bowl had always been filled at the proper times, and he had always had a comfortable basket to sleep in, so he hadn't minded the lack of interaction. He had been well cared for for about two moons, until everything changed.

One day, Rusty's Twoleg had been taken away, and he hadn't returned. After that, none of the other Twolegs in the den had

seemed to remember that Rusty was there. Days had gone by when he had barely seen any other creatures at all. Eventually, when he realized that no one was going to take care of him anymore, he had left the den and struck out on his own. He had only been five moons old.

Initially, Rusty hadn't been prepared for a life on the streets. He hadn't known how to fend for himself. After just a few days, he had almost been ready to go back to the Twolegs, but then he ran across an older ginger tomcat who looked exactly like him.

The other cat had been quite standoffish at first, but when he realized that Rusty was only a kit, he relented. His anger at being disturbed quickly softened into concern as to why Rusty had been wandering the streets alone. Rusty had been suspicious at first; he had already met several mean-spirited cats who had driven him away at first sight. But this stranger seemed somehow different, and before Rusty knew it, he had shared his entire life story up to that point.

When Rusty had mentioned his mother's name, the other cat had reacted with surprise and astonishment. He explained that he had known Nutmeg very well, and that they had even been mates for a short time, before her Twolegs had noticed she was expecting kits and shut her up in their den where she couldn't meet with him anymore. The tomcat had tried to get the Twolegs to take him in as well, but they had driven him away.

"They didn't want another cat," he explained bitterly. "In fact, knowing Twolegs, I'd bet they didn't keep the kits for very long either. How long was it before they split you all up?"

"Three moons," Rusty replied. "They took us away as soon as we could survive without her milk."

"That's what the caring of a Twoleg is worth," the older cat spat. "Why any cat would want to become a kittypet, I'll never know. I don't even know how I convinced myself I could put up with it. I guess love makes you do crazy things. But enough about me. What brings you out here? Why aren't you back in your Twoleg's cozy den?"

"I don't have a Twoleg," Rusty said, trying his best to sound brave. "I left him. I want to be free, just like you."

The other cat let out a chuckle before he stopped himself. "Sorry," he said. "I wasn't trying to offend you. But are you sure you know what you're getting into?"

"Of course I do!" Rusty mowed hotly. "I have claws. I have teeth. I can survive as well as any other cat."

"Not on your own, you can't. There are all kinds of threats in this town that a kit like you isn't prepared to face," the stranger replied, a deadly serious expression on his face. He paused and seemed to consider something. Then at last he spoke again. "Tell you what, why don't I help you out? I can teach you everything you'll ever need to know."

His suggestion had roused Rusty's suspicion all over again. "Why would you help me?" Rusty asked.

"Because you're my kit," the tom said plainly. "My name is Jake. I was your mother's mate, and I'm your father."

Rusty had already started to guess that fact, but hearing Jake speak it aloud just made it real. According to him, he had been mates with Nutmeg just before Rusty and his brothers and sisters had been born. Besides, he and Rusty had the exact same pelt coloring. And what would Jake gain by lying?

Rusty had decided to believe Jake's story, and he stayed with his father for a moon and a half. Jake showed Rusty which scrapcans they could scavenge from freely, and which ones BloodClan had claimed for themselves. He began to teach Rusty his hunting moves, and even promised to teach him how to fight one day. Rusty had been happy, like he had finally found where he belonged. Then his short life completely changed once again.

Jake had received a tip from a fellow loner on where a small rats' nest could be found. Hoping to find some food other than Twoleg scraps for his son, Jake had eagerly acted on the information. While Rusty remained back at a safe distance, Jake had gone in to catch a

rat or two for them to share. He had succeeded, but not without a nasty rate bite on his hind leg. He had been weak for days, lying in his nest while Rusty snatched herbs from Twoleg gardens in a vain attempt to heal him. Finally, Jake had succumbed to his infection, leaving a devastated Rusty all alone for the second time.

With limited knowledge of how to feed and protect himself, Rusty had once again faced the prospect of starvation. To make matters worse, BloodClan had begun expanding its territory not long after Jake's death. Rusty had been able to keep himself alive thanks to the Twoleg scrapcans scattered all around town, but now they were all rapidly becoming unavailable to him. Rusty couldn't hunt his own prey, he couldn't defend himself against any cat who might want to take what little he could collect, and he couldn't take food from BloodClan by force. What was he going to do?

Rusty's thoughts flew back to his recent encounter with Bone and his BloodClan cats. Bone had said that Rusty's father Jake had once been a BloodClan cat himself. Jake had never kept that fact secret, but he had also made it clear to Rusty that his BloodClan days were far behind him. As a naive young cat, Jake had fallen in with the group he had thought was the strongest, but he had slowly come to understand that BloodClan's way of doing things wasn't strength at all. Still, Jake had always said that it had taken an adventure beyond the town for him to fully accept that truth. An adventure with . . . how had he put it . . . ?

A wild cat .

The words came to Rusty all at once. That was how Jake had described his traveling companion. A cat who didn't live with Twolegs, who didn't even live in a Twoleg town. A cat who only hunted live prey and never ate Twoleg food or housecat slop. A cat who was completely and truly wild.

Then Rusty had another thought. Hadn't Bone also mentioned the time Jake had gone away? *He ran off with one of those forest cats,* Bone had said. Or something like that, anyway.

The forest. Had Bone been referring to the forest just beyond the edge of the town? The same forest that that fuzz-brained kitten had

also brought up while he was chattering Rusty's ears off? Looking back, it was almost like Rusty couldn't escape the idea of that place.

Rusty sat bolt upright. If any of those cats' stories were true, than maybe he had more options than he thought. He didn't know what he would do, but if the forest cats had helped his father, perhaps they could help him too. Or maybe he could just go live out there himself, and get away from his problems that way.

Tentatively, Rusty stood and padded over to the fence at the end of the alley. He scrambled to the top and balanced there while he stared out into the deep dark expanse of trees on the other side.

Now that he had laid his eyes on the woods again, he found the confidence that he had only just begun to feel suddenly wavering.

Out there, there were no Twolegs to leave scraps for cats to eat, or to build dens for cats to live in. There was only darkness and trees and the chittering from dozens of different creatures. Any cat who could live out there would have to be tough. Could Rusty be that tough? And, more importantly, could he face up to cats who were?

Jake had been full-grown when he had left the town, trained and ready to face anything the world threw at him. Rusty, on the other paw, was anything but. And yet, no matter where he went or what he did, his biggest problem remained the same: survival. He would spend his days hunting for food and trying to protect himself either way. And as long as BloodClan had already made their intentions for Rusty quite clear, the forest could be his chance for a new start. The question was, did Rusty want to stick around in the same place as cats he knew were dangerous, or did he want to take a chance on some cats who might not be?

"Rusty!" came an excited yowl from nearby.

Rusty turned his head slowly to one side. He opened his mouth to taste the air for scents, but there was no need. He already knew from the grating, high-pitched voice exactly who this newcomer was.

His suspicion was confirmed when he found himself face to face

with a black-and-white kitten.

What was his name again? Smidge?

"It's me! Smudge!" the kitten meowed. "Don't you remember?"

Rusty had long since put his first conversation with Smudge out of his mind. Smudge was strange and nosy, and he could never understand the life Rusty was living. The two of them could never be friends. But clearly Smudge hadn't come to the same conclusion.

"I didn't think I'd see you again! I mean, I always hoped I would. But you didn't come back here for days! Have you come to your senses and found some housefolk yet?" Smudge said quickly.

"No, I haven't," Rusty bit out, as patiently as he could. "And what's so great about housefolk, anyway? They keep you cooped up in a den, and they feed you disgusting slop. Living with Twolegs is the life for lazy cats who've never wanted to go anywhere or do anything. How can you even call yourself a proper cat?"

Smudge at least had the decency to look a little embarrassed by that last remark. "But they groom you. And they give you special food so you don't get sick. Out here, there's all kinds of diseases and injuries you could get. Don't you ever want to feel a little safer?"

Rusty thought Smudge was getting a little too personal.

"No," he said flatly. "I can go wherever I want. If I ever don't like where I am, I can just leave."

"So why are you here?" asked Smudge.

Rusty was taken aback. "What?"

"Why are you in this town?" Smudge said. "You haven't got housefolk. You're super scrawny, so you obviously aren't eating well. And you don't seem like one of those evil rogues I keep hearing about. You don't sound like you like it here at all. So why stay?"

Rusty didn't know what he hated more, the fact that Smudge

pretended to know so much about him or the fact that he actually had a point.

Rusty had never lived anywhere but this town. But the Twolegs had never cared much for him, BloodClan hated him for who his father was, and his father had been taken from him too early. Every time Rusty had begun to feel comfortable with his life, it had been changed by forces outside his control. So why was he staying in a place where all he felt was pain and bitterness and regret?

But all he said to Smudge was, "What difference does it make?"

"I like you," Smudge replied. "And I don't think any cat should have to suffer when it can be avoided."

At the word *suffer*, something inside Rusty snapped. "You think you know what suffering is?" he growled. "You think you know what it's like to be hungry for days? Or to go to sleep and not know if you'll ever wake up again? No! You're a housecat! You can be as lazy as you want, and you'll still get everything handed to you! So why don't you just go cry to your housefolk and leave the talk about suffering to the real cats, you fat, flea-brained fuzzball?"

Hurt showed in Smudge's eyes for a long moment, and then he turned away, as if to leap down from the fence.

To Rusty's surprise, he found that a part of him didn't want to see Smudge go. He had to admit, it felt nice to have some cat he could talk to. And while Rusty didn't exactly regret the words he had hissed out in anger, he supposed he could have been a *little* nicer.

"Wait!" he called, just as Smudge was gathering his paws under him to jump.

Smudge turned around, his amber eyes glinting in the gathering dark.

"I'm . . . sorry," Rusty mewed slowly. "I shouldn't have snapped at you like that."

"No, you shouldn't have," Smudge replied, a hint of anger still in his voice. But he wasn't trying to leave anymore.

The two cats sat in silence for several heartbeats. Rusty stared out into the forest, trying to see just what lay between the shadows of the massive trees. He didn't have much luck.

At last, he gave up and turned back to Smudge, finding his courage to ask the question burning inside him.

"Smudge, do you . . . have you ever heard anything about wild cats in the woods?"

"Wild cats?" Smudge repeated incredulously. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason, just curious," said Rusty, trying to keep his tone light and casual.

"Oh, you don't want anything to do with the wild cats," said Smudge.

"But there are wild cats, then?" asked Rusty.

"I guess," said Smudge. "I've never seen one, but I've heard all sorts of tales."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

"Like they eat live rabbits for breakfast, and sharpen their claws on old bones," Smudge meowed ominously.

Rusty did his best to hold back a laugh. "Do you seriously believe that? It sounds like a tale to frighten kits. Like, 'don't go into the woods or the big bad forest cats will kill you and eat your bones'. What nonsense!"

"Don't say I didn't warn you," said Smudge. He glanced up at the moon in the sky, fringed with stars. "But I should be getting back. My housefolk get very sad if I stay out too late."

How unfortunate, Rusty thought sarcastically.

Smudge leapt down to the ground and padded away. When he reached the mouth of the alley, he turned his head to call back to Rusty.

"See you around! And remember what I said. Be careful of the forest!"

And then he was gone, his dark pelt vanishing into the night.

Rusty remained perched on the fence, once again scanning the forest for any sign of other cats. But he couldn't see their shapes or taste their scent. The short stretch of bare grass that separated the town from the trees was too big for Rusty's eyes or nose to be much use.

There was only one thing for it, Rusty decided. If he wanted to find these forest cats, he couldn't wait for them to come to him. He would just have to take a risk and go strolling into their territory. One of them had helped his father, so surely they couldn't *all* be bad.

I'm just going for a look, he told himself, to silence the worries of Smudge that still rang in his mind. *I won't stay long.*

His decision made, Rusty jumped down off the fence. But not towards his nest—instead, his paws landed on scratchy grass and hard-packed earth.

Rusty flexed his claws in and out, relishing the feeling that coursed through him as they churned up the soil. He had only ever known the cold hard stone the Twolegs used for building. This sense of triumph at touching something natural was strange to him, but he somehow knew that he had been missing it all his life.

Rusty took three cautious steps forward, until he had crossed about half the distance to the woods. He checked the air for cat-scents again, but he still tasted none. Either there were no forest cats out of their nests this late, or the ones that were were extremely good at disguising themselves.

Rusty had almost decided to give up and just go to sleep when he heard a shuffling of leaves from underneath a bush at the edge of the woods. He stiffened and glanced around in mild panic, but when nothing else happened he calmed down.

Must have just been a mouse or something, Rusty assured himself. *I don't have to be worried. There are no wild cats out to get me. And why should there be? Whatever Smudge pretends to know, he's never been out here. Why would that stupid kitten know what forest cats actually—*

His last thought was cut off when a dark gray blur suddenly emerged from the same bush he had dismissed earlier, barreling into him and knocking him off his paws.

CHAPTER FIVE

The chirping of crickets filled the evening air as Graypaw once again padded through the forest behind his mentor and his Clan leader.

This early in newleaf, the nights were still chilly, and Graypaw couldn't help but wish that he had just been allowed to curl up in his nest at the end of another long day. He glanced up into the dark sky, where the stars had yet to appear.

Even StarClan's warriors didn't want to come out tonight, and they don't feel the cold, Graypaw thought, a little resentfully.

He and Lionheart had both been surprised when Bluestar had approached them in camp. They had just returned from a battle training session, and Lionheart had been critiquing his apprentice's technique as they picked prey for themselves from the fresh-kill pile, but Bluestar had requested them for one last task before they went to sleep for the night.

Graypaw hadn't caught most of the details; all he knew was that Bluestar was leading them toward the Twolegplace, just as she had the last time they had all patrolled together. And Graypaw could only think of one reason Bluestar might want to go there.

That kittypet. The orange one.

The idea seemed completely absurd. As much as Graypaw trusted Bluestar's judgment, he had no idea what she thought she was doing just then.

ThunderClan was just defeated on our own territory for the first time in seasons, and Bluestar wants to go traipsing after some Twolegplace cat? It's ridiculous!

Even so, he didn't dare speak his thoughts aloud. No cat would let him hear the end of it if he did.

Graypaw had passed by the Sunningrocks on a border patrol not long after RiverClan had taken them back. The rival Clan's warriors had taunted the ThunderClan patrol, crowing about their victory from where they sat stretched out atop the boulders, but Graypaw and his companions had done their best to ignore them and moved swiftly along.

Later that night, in camp with the other apprentices, Graypaw had speculated as to why Bluestar and Redtail hadn't yet made an attempt to retake the rocks. All four young cats had agreed that their leader and deputy must have had some big battle plan in mind and were just waiting for the right time to use it. That idea had been much easier to consider than the alternative—that there was no plan, and Bluestar had decided to give up and let RiverClan win.

Graypaw shook his head to clear away the stray thoughts. Bluestar hadn't made any major missteps as leader before; he would just have to hope she wasn't about to make one now. Either way, he would find out in the end.

The patrol reached the edge of the forest, and Bluestar directed them under the shadow of a bush.

"Bluestar? What are we doing here?" Lionheart asked.

"This is where we're meant to be right now," the leader replied. "StarClan prophesied it to Spottedleaf, and I have seen it in my dreams as well. There is something we must find here, something that will help make ThunderClan strong again."

"You know I would never question the wisdom of StarClan, but are you sure you haven't misinterpreted the omens?" Lionheart began. "Why would they send us to the Twolegplace?"

Here it comes, thought Graypaw. *Bluestar is going to say it.*

But when she didn't respond immediately, he plucked up the courage to prompt her and see how she responded.

He tried to sound thoughtful. "We can't be here for the Twolegs. They could only ever bring us trouble. So . . . are we looking for a

cat, then?"

Again, Bluestar didn't respond for several long heartbeats. It was Lionheart who spoke next.

"Bluestar, are you sure about this? The Clan has certainly been . . . lessened in recent moons, but recruiting cats from beyond our borders is almost unheard of. Doesn't a warrior reject the soft life of a kittypet? Can an outsider truly learn our ways? Can they be loyal?"

"Only time can tell," Bluestar mewed. "But is there any reason why they shouldn't be given a chance?"

"Does the warrior code allow that?" asked Graypaw. "The rules got harsher after what Pinestar did, right?"

"Pinestar abandoned Clan life to live with Twolegs. He took the easy way out. Any kittypet choosing to join us would have a much harder time," said Lionheart.

"Even that kittypet we saw last time we came here? He was pretty good. He almost caught that bird," Graypaw replied.

Bluestar gazed at him with an expression that seemed both reprimanding and approving. "All cats have the ability to live in the wild, even those who live among Twolegs. Those cats may simply take a bit longer to discover their true instincts."

Lionheart seemed to ponder her words for a moment. "A loner or a rogue, perhaps. But a kittypet? All they know is soft nests and pampering. They'd never survive a day out here. They can't become one of us."

Graypaw didn't quite believe it could be that simple. "Even if they had the talent? Even if they really tried?" he asked.

Lionheart scowled at him. "All the effort in the world couldn't help them overcome the laziness Twolegs can instill. And besides, bringing in outsiders isn't the proper way to grow a Clan. We'll just have to hope for more kits as the weather gets warmer."

"But there are no kits! Or even queens!" Bluestar said forcefully.

Lionheart and Graypaw, taken aback by her outburst, could do nothing but stare. After a moment, Bluestar seemed to realize the way her words had come across. She didn't look ashamed exactly, but she did duck her head slightly.

"ThunderClan has lost so many warriors," she murmured softly. "Adderfang, Thrushpelt, Stormtail . . ."

Her voice wavered as she named the last cat, whom Graypaw knew had been her father, and she turned her head away, seemingly unable to go on.

"Very well. I've trusted your judgment before, and I'll do so again." Lionheart sat down on his haunches and said no more.

Graypaw, for his part, couldn't silence his misgivings so quickly. He couldn't stop thinking of ThunderClan's troubles with RiverClan, and thinking of all that made him think of Silverpaw, and thinking of her just made him realize all over again how complicated everything truly was . . .

- - -

Graypaw had met Silverpaw at the Gathering under the last full moon. They had both been freshly apprenticed, and together with several other young cats they spent the early part of the evening swapping stories from their training. Even when the other apprentices became bored and wandered off, Graypaw and Silverpaw stayed near each other, for some reason Graypaw couldn't have explained.

Graypaw had been told ahead of time that he shouldn't get too friendly with cats from other Clans, but he still felt drawn to Silverpaw for reasons he couldn't explain. They both knew that their Clans were frequently at odds, but Graypaw just couldn't imagine ever wanting to fight this enthusiastic young she-cat.

Silverpaw spent most of the night complaining about her father Crookedstar and how overprotective of her he had been ever since

her mother and littermates had succumbed to greencough when she was young. Graypaw found himself surprisingly willing to listen. As the kit of two ordinary warriors, who had never aspired to be much more than an ordinary warrior himself, he couldn't exactly empathize with her situation, but it didn't matter. He was happy just being with her.

When the Gathering drew to a close, both apprentices had agreed that they didn't want to lose contact with each other. Every couple of nights since, they had met up at a secret spot on the border, near where a Twoleg bridge crossed the river that separated their territories. Sometimes, they would play simple kit games, like moss-ball or hide and seek, and sometimes they would just talk. Their meetings always seemed shorter than Graypaw wanted; they both had to be back in their nests before their Clanmates could notice they were gone. Still, Graypaw had always counted himself lucky to have such a good friendship with Silverpaw. Even if all the older ThunderClan and RiverClan cats wanted to do was snap at each other, maybe their apprentices could show them how to look past their differences.

But then, on the day RiverClan claimed Sunningrocks, everything changed.

When he had first heard Tigerclaw and Ravenpaw's news, Graypaw had raced off before he realized what he was doing. When he had nearly reached the border, he pulled up short, wondering if he should turn back. He couldn't smell any cat following him, but he had still been foolish to run out of camp. And there was no guarantee that his friend would be waiting for him. She didn't know he wanted to see her. She could be in the medicine den-or worse, dead. And, if he came across a RiverClan border patrol, how would he explain why he was desperately looking for one of their apprentices?

Thankfully, when he reached the meeting spot, he found Silverpaw waiting for him. Neither of them had to explain why they had come. They both knew what the other was thinking.

Graypaw looked Silverpaw's lustrous pelt up and down. He couldn't see any claw-wounds or torn fur on it.

"Were you in the battle?" he asked. "Did you fight?"

"As if I could have!" she scoffed. "I'm not much older than you. And even if I was a fully trained warrior, Crookedstar would still try to keep me safe!"

Personally, Graypaw thought that was all right with him. He didn't like the idea of anything bad happening to his friend. But he stayed silent, knowing that her father's nature was a touchy subject for her.

"Did you fight?" she asked.

"No," said Graypaw. "They didn't send me—which is lucky. We didn't even think there would be a battle."

"Oakheart and Leopardfur have been discussing it for days. They kept saying ThunderClan had held on to our land for long enough." A look of pain and regret crossed her face. "I didn't think they'd actually attack you! You have to believe me. And even if I did, I couldn't have told you. That would have ruined everything. You understand, right?"

Graypaw nodded emphatically. "Yes! I don't want you to get in trouble. If you told me, cats would start asking too many questions."

"That's good," she said simply, and they stood in awkward silence as the moments crawled by.

"What does this mean for . . . for us? We aren't going to let some rocks get in the way of our friendship, are we?" Graypaw blurted out.

"Of course not!" Silverpaw sounded offended by the idea. "It's all stupid anyway. Who cares which Clan owns Sunningrocks? We both have other sunny spots in our territories."

"You're Crookedstar's daughter. Can't you talk to him? Get him to back off?" Graypaw pressed.

Silverpaw shook her head. "I've tried, and I don't think he really wants to fight over this. But it's a matter of pride for a lot of our warriors. They don't want to give up any of our territory for no

good reason."

"No good reason?" Graypaw repeated incredulously. "They'd just sit around on it all day! At least we ThunderClan cats know how to hunt between the cracks in the rocks. Your Clan has an entire river full of fish! Doesn't it make sense to leave Sunningrocks to us?"

"Try telling that to Oakheart and his friends," she replied. "There are some of them who'd probably be happy to watch ThunderClan starve if it meant we would get an advantage."

Graypaw tried to tell himself that Silverpaw didn't share those feelings, that she was only trying to warn him out of genuine concern, but the thought of his Clanmates losing the prey they needed to survive because of RiverClan's stupid grudge distressed him nevertheless. ThunderClan would need all the able cats they could get if they wanted to make it through the next few seasons.

Following his conversation with Silverpaw, Graypaw had returned to camp and done his best to put it all out of his mind. Then Bluestar had summoned him and Lionheart for her patrol, and all his worries about his Clan's safety had come rushing back.

As he remembered everything that had happened in the forest recently, Graypaw suddenly found himself wishing that Bluestar's idea to visit the Twolegplace would yield the results she desired.

- - -

"Graypaw."

Lionheart's voice jolted Graypaw back to the present, and a moment later, his paw hit Graypaw roughly in the side.

"Wake up," Lionheart growled softly. "Something's happening. Pay attention."

"I'm awake," Graypaw said. *You didn't have to be so rough.*

He lifted his head to look in front of him and saw the ginger cat sitting atop the Twoleg fence, seemingly talking with a slightly younger black-and-white kit. Then, as Graypaw watched, the other

cat jumped back down into the Twolegplace, leaving the ginger tom alone.

The strange cat hesitated for a few moments, neither moving nor making a sound. His eyes glinted in the rising moonlight as he surveyed the forest before him.

Eventually, to Graypaw's surprise, the young tom actually jumped down onto the grass that separated the trees from the Twoleg dens. Graypaw had to admit, he had to respect the other cat's daring, even if he was using it to trespass.

The cat walked forward, then stopped to taste the air. Graypaw froze for a heartbeat, but the wind was blowing from behind the kittypet, so he wouldn't pick up the patrol's scent unless he moved closer.

And surely he wouldn't . . . right? No kittypet would be crazy enough to actually cross our border, Graypaw told himself.

The kittypet didn't cross the border. He stayed in his place, eyes darting from side to side.

Bluestar's gaze suddenly turned on Graypaw. "Attack him," she said.

Graypaw stiffened in shock. "What?"

"Attack him," Bluestar repeated. "Get out there and attack him. I want to see if he puts up a fight."

Graypaw took a deep breath to steady himself. *He* is *near our territory*, he thought. *Any good warrior would try to drive him off.*

Graypaw shot forward. He leaped out from under the bush and rushed toward the kittypet, colliding with him and knocking him to the ground.

Graypaw and his opponent rolled across the ground for a short distance in a tangle of paws and tails. They only came to a stop when they hit a patch of nettles. The kittypet hissed in pain and arched his back, trying to throw Graypaw off, but Graypaw dug his claws into the other cat's pelt and managed to hang on. The ginger

tom continued to writhe and squirm, but he couldn't free himself. Graypaw's weight had pinned him to the ground.

Then, all of a sudden, he froze, going limp from ears to tail-tip. Unprepared for his enemy's tactic, Graypaw lost his advantage as the kittypet flipped himself over. Of course, this meant his soft belly was now exposed, but Graypaw didn't have the time to do anything more than fall backward. He hit the ground with a huff as all his breath left him. The kittypet thrashed his way out of Graypaw's now-limp grip and sprinted toward the fence.

Graypaw wasn't going to let him get away that easily. Bluestar had wanted to assess this cat's skills; the least Graypaw could do would be to make sure she got a good show.

Scrambling to his paws, Graypaw gave chase to his opponent. Surprisingly, just before he reached the safety of the Twolegplace, the kittypet spun around to confront Graypaw head-on. Both young cats pulled up short, glaring at each other fiercely.

Graypaw held the eye contact for several seconds before he decided that enough was enough. He sat down and began to lick one of his forepaws.

"Hi there!" he meowed cheerfully. "You put up quite a fight, for a tame kitty."

The kittypet kept up his defensive posture for a second, as though he might attack again, but then he dropped back onto his pads, loosening his muscles as he did. "Who are you calling tame?" he growled.

Graypaw wasn't certain how to respond to that. "Uh . . . you? You have a collar, don't you?"

The kittypet—or maybe that wasn't what he was after all—sighed dramatically. "That doesn't make me anyone's pet. And it certainly doesn't make me soft. I'll fight you again if I have to."

"Easy! We don't need to go through all that again," Graypaw said quickly.

The other cat remained silent, eyes narrowed as if he didn't quite agree with Graypaw's sentiments.

"Let's try this again, shall we? I'm Graypaw," Graypaw continued.

Now the other cat just seemed confused. He awkwardly bent his head to lick his chest fur, clearly trying to mask his bewilderment.

"I'm, uh, Rusty," he grunted.

Graypaw kept speaking. "So what are you even doing out here, anyway? Don't you know these woods are dangerous?"

Rusty's eyes narrowed. "If you're the most dangerous thing the woods have to offer, I think I can manage," he scoffed.

Graypaw didn't get the impression that Rusty entirely believed what he was saying.

He decided to have a little fun with this cat. "Oh, I'm far from the most dangerous thing," he said ominously. "If I were a full warrior, I'd have left some real wounds on an intruder like you. Then you'd really have something to think about."

Rusty grunted dismissively. "A little thing like you? Yeah, right."

Graypaw didn't take offense. Both of them were just blustering to each other, after all.

"Don't worry, though," he said. "I wouldn't have roughed you up too much. Not unless you were from another Clan."

"Another Clan?" Rusty mewed. "There's more of you?"

"Oh, yeah. The four warrior Clans of the forest. Haven't you heard of us?"

Rusty scowled. "No."

"Well, that explains why you came out here," Graypaw mewed. He paused for a second, then went on. "I'm from ThunderClan. There are three other Clans, too, and they're always trying to steal our

prey. We always have to be ready to fight. No Clan can forgive trespassing. Especially ShadowClan. If you'd run into *them*, they'd have ripped you to shreds without a second thought."

"Really." Rusty still looked skeptical.

"Really," Graypaw said, nodding emphatically. "The other Clans are always trying to steal prey that's rightfully ours. So we have to keep them on their own side of our borders. Once I've finished my training, and I'm a ThunderClan warrior, that'll be my job."

"You mean you're not a warrior yet?" Rusty mewed curiously.

"Oh, no. I have to train for moons first. There's a lot to learn before I'm ready. But once I am, I'll have all our enemies shaking in their flea-ridden skins."

Rusty looked up toward the treetops. "But do you really have to fight *all* the time? Are these other cats really trespassing so much? It's a pretty big forest."

"Not big enough," Graypaw replied with a shake of his head. "We have to protect what's ours. If we ever let our guard down, you can bet the other Clans would take advantage of that in a heartbeat."

"I guess so," Rusty muttered.

"But you probably wouldn't understand," Graypaw told him. "You weren't born here. You don't have warrior blood running through your veins. You can't wake up and smell the leaves, or feel the wind in your whiskers. It makes a big difference."

Rusty stiffened. "I'm not some pampered house pet," he growled. "I might live among the Twolegs, but I'm as wild and free as you."

"If you say so." Graypaw licked one forepaw and drew it slowly over his ears. "Just count yourself lucky that you didn't actually cross our border, because if you had—"

"Graypaw!"

At the sound of his mentor's stern voice from behind him, Graypaw

jumped. He had nearly forgotten that Lionheart and Bluestar were still close by. Turning his head, he saw the two older cats stalking toward him from the shadows.

"That's Lionheart," Graypaw whispered to Rusty. "He's my mentor. That means he's training me to become a warrior. And the she-cat is Bluestar. She's the leader of every cat in ThunderClan."

Rusty stared past Graypaw at the approaching warriors, unease beginning to show in his eyes.

"You should not have ventured this close to the Twolegplace, Graypaw," said Lionheart. "What if you were seen? They might have taken you away."

Graypaw lowered his head meekly as he suddenly remembered exactly where he was. "Sorry, Lionheart."

Bluestar turned her icy gaze on Rusty. "And what is this cat still doing here?"

"He meant no harm, Bluestar," Graypaw meowed quickly. "He didn't know about the Clans or the borders. But I told him, and now he understands. Don't you?" he finished, glancing at Rusty himself.

Rusty ducked his head.

"Always be on alert, Graypaw," Bluestar said strictly. "Loners are often skilled in deception. They don't have a Clan to support them, so they have to find other ways to survive. If you take your eyes off them too long, they may claw you in the back."

Graypaw couldn't believe that Rusty would ever want to hurt ThunderClan, but he knew it would be a bad idea to argue with his leader.

"And you," continued Bluestar, turning back to Rusty. "Is Graypaw correct about you?"

"I never intended to steal, if that's what you're asking," Rusty meowed, bravely meeting Bluestar's eyes. "I didn't know you all lived here."

"And yet you came here tonight anyway . . ." Bluestar mused. She took a step forward. "So if you didn't want our land or our prey, what were you *really* doing?"

Graypaw wasn't sure, but he thought he heard Rusty gulp. Even so, the small ginger tom refused to back down as the older she-cat strode forward to meet him.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Rusty," he replied, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt.

"Well, Rusty, you defended yourself well for a cat your age, especially one living among the Twolegs," said Bluestar. "But I wonder how long you could really survive in a place like this."

Rusty's expression shifted from confident to confused. "Survive?" he echoed. "In a place like this?"

And, at that moment, Graypaw realized exactly what Bluestar was about to do.

This cat is tough, no doubt about it, Graypaw thought. *But maybe Lionheart was right. Does Rusty have what it takes to become a warrior? Will he even want to try?*

Graypaw couldn't come up with an answer, but as he watched Bluestar stalk toward Rusty, he knew that soon enough, he would find out, one way or another.

CHAPTER SIX

Rusty couldn't help but take a step back as Bluestar approached him. He could see an intensity in her eyes that he didn't quite like.

Seeing her up close, he suddenly noticed all the white hairs around her muzzle and the ugly scar running across her shoulders, as if some creature had run its claws through her long ago. The golden tabby tom beside Bluestar wasn't as old as her, but he still carried himself like a cat who had learned how to get by without relying on anyone else. Rusty now understood what Graypaw had meant about watching out for warriors.

And I nearly strayed onto their territory, he thought. *Good thing I didn't. But what's going to happen to me now?*

Bluestar's words were still ringing in his ears. She'd claimed that she wanted to know if he could survive out in the woods. But why would she ask that? Could it have just been idle curiosity?

Rusty had a terrible feeling that that wasn't the case.

Everything was going wrong. Rusty had run into the wild cats sooner than he had thought he would, and things hadn't gone the way he had expected. These wild cats were fiercely territorial. They didn't want or need him lurking around. And, just like BloodClan, they seemed more interested in guarding what they had and keeping other cats away than anything else, like compassion or integrity. That last realization made Rusty's skin crawl more than all the others.

Rusty didn't know what he had gotten himself into; he only knew that he didn't like it.

But what had he thought would happen? That these cats would just deal with BloodClan for him? Clearly, they had enough problems of their own. Or had he thought that they would simply accept him into their group? That option seemed even less likely than the first.

Still, since these cats didn't look like they were going to kill him immediately, Rusty found the courage to speak up again.

"Survive?" he stammered, echoing the words Bluestar had spoken to him. "I-I couldn't survive out here! I mean, sure, I've been doing all right in the town, but I've just been scavenging from scrapcans, really. I wouldn't know the first thing about being wild or whatever else it is you-"

Rusty forced his jaws to clamp themselves shut. Babbling wouldn't impress these cats, especially not when all he was doing was admitting his own weakness.

But Bluestar's gaze didn't waver or harden. In fact, it seemed to hone in on Rusty even more the more he spoke.

"I've been watching you, Rusty," she said at last. "I've watched you for many days now."

Rusty didn't like the sound of that, but he wasn't about to interrupt a Clan leader to say so.

"The first day I saw you, up on the Twoleg fence, you tried to catch a bird that flew close by you," Bluestar went on. "And you very nearly succeeded, didn't you? I'd say you have more skill than you might imagine. Or more potential, at the very least."

"Oh?" said Rusty. "You saw that?" Truthfully, he couldn't quite remember the day she was describing, but he'd play along if it kept him alive and uninjured.

"Of course, catching prey is only one part of living in the forest. You also have to know how to hold on to it when other cats try to take it from you," Bluestar mewed slowly.

Rusty had noticed Graypaw's eyes widening throughout his conversation with Bluestar, but it was Lionheart who reacted first to the ThunderClan leader's latest words.

"Bluestar, with all due respect, you can not be serious!" he growled incredulously as he took two paw steps forward. "This cat would have strolled right onto our territory if we hadn't stopped him. He

says a lot of things about himself, but how can we know what his true intentions are? We should chase him away while we still can."

"Not so fast," Bluestar replied. "Graypaw sensed no threat in him."

"Graypaw is an apprentice. He has not yet seen the danger rogues can bring," Lionheart retorted.

"And maybe you have seen too much of it," Bluestar said, softly but firmly. "We outnumber this cat, and most of us are larger and more powerful than him. There is nothing he can do to stop all of us. For the moment, I will trust Graypaw's judgment."

Lionheart huffed out a breath through his nose but did not argue again.

Bluestar just kept talking. "And then there is the matter of what Spottedleaf saw. You were there with all my senior warriors when she recounted her dream."

That prompted Lionheart to react again.

"And you think this cat is-?" He broke off, shaking his head. "I don't understand. What could possibly make you think this little incident has anything to do with that prophecy from StarClan?"

A prophecy? About me? Rusty couldn't help but take Lionheart's side. He didn't know what StarClan was, but why would they make up a whole prophecy about a cat who didn't even live in the forest?

"We can discuss that later," Bluestar said, and Rusty could detect some real authority behind her words. "For now, we must discern this cat's true intentions . . . and what his future will be."

"Excuse me, but do I get a say in any of this?" Rusty interjected. His mind was reeling, flabbergasted as he was by everything he was witnessing, but he was aware of his surroundings enough to know that he didn't want these cats to choose what would happen next for him.

"That depends," Lionheart meowed. "If we let you go, will you try to sneak onto our land again?"

Taken aback, Rusty initially had no idea how he should respond. "Um . . . uh . . ."

"Speak up!" Bluestar admonished him sharply. "We Clan cats have no tolerance for trespassing rogues who want to steal our prey."

"Why?" Rusty asked. "The forest is big. Surely, there must be enough prey to go around."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Graypaw gaping at him in shock and horror, but it was already too late for him to take his words back.

Bluestar recoiled from Rusty as though he were a rotting, maggot-ridden piece of dead prey. "I will ignore your insult," she spat, "since you do not know our ways. But do not make the mistake of judging us again. You may not live a soft, overfed life in a Twoleg nest, but I would think that would only give you more reason to understand us. You claim to support yourself in the Twolegplace. Is there enough prey to go around there?"

"I . . . suppose not," Rusty mewed meekly, hanging his head. He should have guessed that his skinny frame would give his hunger away.

Lionheart scowled. "Cats who do not have enough prey where they live usually won't take long to start exploring beyond their proper territories and poking their noses where they don't belong. If you grow desperate for food, you could quickly become a threat to us."

"I'm not a threat, I swear!" replied Rusty.

"Maybe not now, but who can say what will be?" Lionheart said. "In a few moons, when the cold sets in, you might find yourself quite happy to stroll back over our border and hunt a mouse or two. So I ask you again: if we let you leave here unharmed, do we have your guarantee that you will not return?"

Rusty considered the older tom's words for several moments, but in the end, he only had one answer to give. He gave it with as much sincerity as he could muster.

"No. I'm sorry. I didn't realize you cats had claimed this forest. But I know better now. If you want to send me away, I won't come here anymore."

But if I keep that promise, I'll just have to go back and face BloodClan alone. What am I going to do?

Still, both the older cats appeared to be satisfied with his response. They each took one step back; their hackles fell, and their defensive postures relaxed.

Bluestar's face took on a thoughtful expression. "And yet, the fact that you came here at all signifies that you are not like most kittypets, Rusty."

Rusty wanted to bristle at her use of the word "kittypet" to describe him, but if she had decided to give him a fair hearing, he thought it was best for him to give her the same thing in return. Plus, he was starting to get tired of correcting everyone who confused him for a housecat, especially when they couldn't have known better.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Bluestar's answer came in the form of another question. "Tell me, Rusty, how old are you?"

"Eight moons," he mewed, unsure what she was trying to get at.

"And how long has it been since you lived with a Twoleg? You have a collar, so you must have been a pet at some point in the past."

"About three moons," said Rusty. "I gave up on the Twolegs when I realized they weren't going to care for me anymore. Then I met my-"

He paused for a few heartbeats.

"I met another cat. He taught me how to fend for myself. Or at least, he tried to. He's gone now. And as I suppose you can tell, he didn't get a lot of time to teach me. We just barely got started before . . . before . . ."

The memory was too much to bear. Rusty let his voice trail off, breathing in deeply and staring down at his paws so these cats wouldn't see his mournful expression until it passed.

When he looked up again, Bluestar was sharing a look with Lionheart that Rusty couldn't quite read, but he felt reasonably sure that part of what she was saying was something like *this is better than we thought*.

"Hmmm," Lionheart mused, clearly starting to come around to the idea of whatever it was his leader wanted from him.

"And this other cat taught you how to hunt? How to fight?" the golden tabby warrior asked Rusty.

"Well, yeah. Just the basics, though. Like I said," Rusty replied.

"What if we could change that?" said Bluestar. "Rusty, how would you like to be trained as a ThunderClan warrior?"

Her proposition caused Graypaw to speak up for the first time in a while.

"Bluestar, can we do that?" the young apprentice asked in bewilderment. "Maybe this cat can fight, but he doesn't have any warrior blood!"

"Warrior blood," Bluestar repeated ruefully. "Too much warrior blood has been shed in recent moons. Perhaps it is time we looked beyond our borders to replenish our Clan."

As their leader's voice trailed off, Graypaw looked questioningly at his mentor, but Lionheart only stared back at him, stone-faced. After a few moments, he turned that same gaze on Rusty.

"You must understand, young one, that Bluestar is only offering to train you. There is no guarantee that you will ever be able to become a full warrior. Perhaps the training will be too difficult for you, or perhaps you will never truly take our ways to heart. ThunderClan only accepts cats who are willing to put the Clan's needs before their own. With the kind of life you have led, we will need to know that you can do that," Lionheart said gruffly.

The golden tabby tom's words stung Rusty to his core.

"Then why invite me in at all? Why give me a chance if you don't trust me?" he asked.

Before Lionheart could answer, Bluestar took a step forward. She sighed heavily, then opened her mouth to speak.

"Rusty," she said, "you are right to ask those questions. But I assure you, we are not trying to trick you or to humiliate you." She paused for several heartbeats, then began again. "Rusty, can you keep a secret?"

Rusty gulped, but he put on a brave face and nodded.

Bluestar exhaled again. "Then I will tell you of the problem that we in ThunderClan are facing. The fact is, we simply do not have enough warriors to support ourselves anymore. The cold seasons may be over now, but they still weakened us, and the other Clans may take advantage of that. In fact, one already has. If we are left in this state for much longer, I fear for what will become of us. That is why we need more cats-even if we must turn to cats like you."

Graypaw and Lionheart exchanged glances again, and this time, both cats had shame and resignation mingling in their eyes.

"And you really think I can help you? Just because I almost caught one bird one time?" Rusty asked, tilting his head.

"It is certainly not ideal, but we must take all the options available to us into consideration," Bluestar replied. "If you accept, you would be trained as a warrior with Graypaw and our other apprentices. You would learn our traditions and how we hunt and fight."

"But," added Lionheart, "you cannot live with a paw in two worlds. You cannot be both in our Clan and outside it. If we take you in, as Bluestar is suggesting, you would need to stay with us for the rest of your days. We cannot risk you revealing our deepest secrets to any random cats you might meet."

"Lionheart is right. If you come with us, you can never return to your Twolegplace. We would give you room in our apprentices' den,

and you would stay in our camp," Bluestar finished.

I can never return to the Twolegplace? Rusty thought to himself. *These Clan cats don't mess around!*

But all he said was, "I understand, Bluestar. There's not much for me to go back to anyway."

"Indeed. At least you have had the sense to stay away from the Twoleg dens. Not many hungry cats would show that same restraint. And there is one other benefit as well," Bluestar told him.

"What's that?" Rusty asked.

"You are still a tom," Bluestar said ominously. "In all the ways that matter."

"Still a tom . . . ?" Rusty echoed, confused. "I'm sorry. I don't get it."

Graypaw glanced down at his paws quickly, then back up at Rusty. "I've heard of this. The Twolegs . . . they don't always like their cats having kits. A lot of them will take their kittypets and, well, make it so that doesn't happen. They even have a special Twoleg for it. They call it the Cutter." He shivered in fright. "Personally, I'm glad I don't have to go through that."

"No cat would want to," Lionheart assured his apprentice.

He turned to look Rusty in the eye. "It is a terrible tragedy. The Twolegs try so often to deny what it means for a cat to be a cat. You should be thankful that you will never have to experience that kind of pain."

"Um, okay," Rusty said slowly. "But what does any of that have to do with me becoming a warrior?"

Bluestar took a step forward, her tail swishing behind her.

"You are a true cat, Rusty. Even before you met us here tonight, you were on the path to learning to survive. And beyond that, you are respectful. You have shown willingness to honor our claims on this forest and its prey. We can find many Twolegplace cats who are soft

and lazy, or many rogues who care only for themselves. It is rare that we find a cat who wants to be independent but can still defer to authority. That is the kind of cat I believe you to be. That is why we have asked you to join us."

"We would train you to live as all cats should," put in Lionheart. "You would have prey to eat and a nest to sleep in at night. If you stay with us and we accept you, you would also join us in battle to defend our territory. You could have the pride of supporting something greater than yourself, but it would mean giving up your life from before."

"But beware," said Bluestar. "Do not think that we will keep you just because we take you in. We will be training you alongside our own young cats like Graypaw, who have already been apprentices for multiple moons. If you cannot keep up, or if you cannot learn our customs, you will have to go back to living on your own."

As the ThunderClan leader finished speaking, something stirred deep within Rusty-a memory, but also a deeper feeling at the same time. His mind flashed back to the day when he had first been made painfully aware of BloodClan's plans to take the whole town for their own. Their mean-spirited words, and the names they had called Rusty-"puny cat", and the like-had stung almost more than their claws.

Now, here were some cats who claimed to belong to another Clan. They did seem more laid-back than Bone or the rest of Scourge's followers, but they still couldn't stop talking about battle. Was fighting really the most important thing in their lives? Did they really have to struggle so much just to hold on to the forest and the prey they needed to live?

Moreover, Rusty began to realize what Bluestar and Lionheart's words truly entailed. They had asked him to join them, but they had also made it sound more about supporting them than about him.

"So you'll only keep me around as long as I'm useful to you?" he asked hotly.

Lionheart's expression hardened into a mild scowl. "Bluestar is not making this offer for no reason. Yes, ThunderClan needs hunters and fighters, but we also see potential in you. If you choose not to join us, that is up to you, but if you do, there must be consequences. No cat can live with a paw in two worlds."

Yes, Rusty thought, *but are the two worlds really so different?*

He decided to keep that question to himself, though. These wild cats didn't seem to be aware of BloodClan, and even if he told them, there likely wouldn't be much they could do-not after what he had learned about how they rarely strayed beyond their territory.

"I get that. Really, I do," he mewed. "I'm just . . . not sure. Can I take some time to think this over?"

Bluestar narrowed her eyes, but eventually, she dipped her head in assent. "Very well. You may have three days with which to make up your mind. The day after that, Lionheart will be waiting here at sunhigh. If you wish to join us, you may meet him then."

"Thank you, Bluestar," Rusty mewed, dipping his head to her in return. "I-"

"I wasn't finished," Bluestar said evenly.

Rusty's jaws snapped closed.

"As I said, my invitation for you to join ThunderClan is not offered lightly," the leader continued. "It is an exceptionally rare occasion for any outsider to be given such a courtesy. But understand this-it does not make you special. If you decline our offer, and we scent you on our territory afterwards, we will treat you as we would any other trespassing rogue. Then you would see what it is to be a warrior."

Rusty didn't think Bluestar had really needed to make her threat as ominous as she had done, but he also felt confident she could back it up either way.

"I understand," he replied. "I can't say if I'll join you right now, but if I don't, I will not bother you again."

"Thank you, Rusty," Bluestar mewed kindly. "As I said, you will find Lionheart waiting here for you on the fourth day after this night. He will arrive at sunhigh and remain until the sun has set halfway. If you have not joined him by then, we will assume you have turned us down, and if we catch you here again, we will not hesitate to drive you off. Do you accept these terms?"

"I do," said Rusty, and she nodded once more in acknowledgement.

With a swish of her tail, she turned to her Clanmates. "Now come along, you two. We have dallied here for long enough, and we must finish checking the border by moonhigh."

She stalked back toward the cover of the forest, and the other two Clan cats followed her. Before they vanished into the darkness, however, they all turned around to gaze one last time at Rusty, who had not yet moved. Lionheart's expression was unreadable, as though he were still sizing Rusty up, but Graypaw was giving him an encouraging smile. Bluestar, meanwhile, appeared oddly conflicted.

Rusty couldn't help but wonder what that might be about. *She mentioned they don't have enough warriors . . . Is she worried they won't make it through this season? Or that they won't be able to defend themselves if another Clan attacks them?*

As the three cats finally disappeared into the underbrush, a new, more chilling thought struck Rusty.

Or does she already regret inviting me to join them?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ravenpaw sat contentedly in the middle of the clearing with his tail tucked underneath him. Sunlight broke through the treetops, casting dappled patches of shadow across the forest floor. A gentle breeze ruffled Ravenpaw's fur as he closed his eyes contentedly.

Ravenpaw tasted the air and sensed the presence of all the cats he loved most around him, like his brother Dustpaw and his best friend Graypaw. Even his parents, Fuzzypelt and Robinwing, whom he had lost early in his apprenticeship, were suddenly beside him again.

This is wonderful, he thought. *No enemies, no battles . . . no mean old Tigerclaw. It's almost perfect.*

Glancing down, Ravenpaw saw a plump mouse lying between his front paws. My favorite! Now the day really was perfect. Ravenpaw bent his head to take a bite of his prey—

And he tasted nothing.

Ravenpaw recoiled in surprise and confusion. *That's odd. What sort of fresh-kill tastes like empty air?*

He bent to take a second bite, but nothing had changed.

Something wasn't right.

Ravenpaw cast his gaze around the clearing, searching for anything amiss. To his horror, as he did so, the sunlight abruptly vanished, leaving the forest shrouded in shadow, as if night had just fallen. The warm, soft breeze rose into a harsh, cold wind that ruffled Ravenpaw's fur and sent a chill up his spine as it tore through the trees. To make matters worse, all the cats Ravenpaw had felt close by him moments before had seemingly disappeared, leaving no hint that they had ever been there in the first place.

Ravenpaw's eyes widened, and his pelt spiked in alarm. Without

meaning to, he let out a pitiful, terrified whimper—the sort of sound he had been known to make during his kithood, whenever his brother had play-fought too roughly or a storm had swept through the ThunderClan camp. Ravenpaw had tried hard to leave such reactions in his past once he had begun his apprenticeship, but now, try as he might, he couldn't stop the terror building inside him.

He took a deep breath, forcing his frenzied heartbeat to slow. It seemed to work, and after a few seconds, Ravenpaw tried opening his mouth to call out and see if any cat could hear him. His shock set in again, though, when he discovered that he couldn't even hear himself.

That was too much for Ravenpaw. He wanted to leap to his paws and run away, but the muscles in his legs wouldn't respond, and he remained rooted to the ground, helpless in his curled-up position. With nothing else to do, Ravenpaw screwed his eyes shut tightly . . .

And then he heard the voice.

"Ravenpaw."

The apprentice stiffened at the sound of that gruff and familiar tone. He knew all too well who it came from, but he didn't want to acknowledge the other cat just yet.

"Ravenpaw," the voice came again, but the apprentice still ignored it.

"Ravenpaw!"

This time, Ravenpaw felt something jab roughly into his side, knocking the breath out of him. His eyes suddenly shot open, and he found himself in his nest in the ThunderClan apprentices' den.

It didn't take long for Ravenpaw to figure out what was happening. The large, broad-shouldered shape of a cat stood above him, just inside the den entrance—a shape belonging to his mentor Tigerclaw.

But what had Tigerclaw come to the apprentices' den for?

Ravenpaw wondered. There seemed to be no more light outside the den than there was inside it. How early in the morning was it?

The other three apprentices sat nearby, likely having been awakened by the commotion. Sandpaw and Dustpaw softly sniggered to each other, but Graypaw just stared at Ravenpaw with a sympathetic expression.

So that was all a dream, Ravenpaw thought to himself. *Mouse dung! And it was such a nice one, too . . . Why does Tigerclaw have to ruin everything?*

"Get up," the dark brown tabby grunted. "We're going on patrol."

"Isn't it too early for the dawn patrol?" Ravenpaw asked as he heaved himself to his feet and shook the moss scraps out of his fur.

Tigerclaw stepped back, leaving the den entrance clear. Ravenpaw could now see that his suspicions had been correct; while the sunrise wasn't too far away, it would still be some time before it started.

"It's not that kind of patrol," Tigerclaw said. "This is special. Redtail will explain everything."

As he followed his mentor out into the camp clearing, Ravenpaw realized that he and Tigerclaw weren't the only ones awake at this early hour. The Clan deputy stood in the middle of the camp, near the fresh-kill pile, speaking to a few warriors who had assembled around him. Ravenpaw could see Willowpelt, Runningwind, and Darkstripe watching Redtail expectantly.

Redtail looked up as he noticed the two newcomers approaching. "Ah, Tigerclaw, how kind of you to finally join us," he meowed evenly.

His gaze darkened more than a little as it fell on Ravenpaw. "I see I was unable to persuade you not to bring your apprentice."

Tigerclaw sniffed. "Surely having more cats will be helpful for this mission," he replied.

A mission? The words caused the fur on the back of Ravenpaw's neck to stand up. Given what was currently going on in the Clan—their lack of warriors and their need for prey—there was only one mission Bluestar would consider setting any healthy cats aside for: reclaiming the hunting grounds around the Sunningrocks.

And I'm supposed to be part of that? the apprentice wondered incredulously. *What could these cats possibly think I'd be useful for?*

Clearly, however, Tigerclaw thought differently. For several heartbeats, he and Redtail just stared into each other's eyes, neither one backing down. Ravenpaw found himself hoping that this time, Redtail would order Tigerclaw to leave him behind, and he could stay out of the conflict.

Unfortunately, that didn't happen. Redtail looked away, shaking his head. "Very well. But the same rules as last time will apply. If the situation becomes too dangerous, Ravenpaw will sit it out. He must be protected from harm."

"Of course, Redtail," Tigerclaw meowed gruffly, after only a heartbeat's hesitation.

"Now, how about we get back to the plan?" Darkstripe asked, a hint of annoyance creeping into his tone. "I still haven't been told why I had to leave my comfortable nest when it's still so dark out that I can barely see my own whiskers."

"That was the idea," said Redtail. "As I'm sure you've all already guessed, Bluestar has decided that it's finally time for us to stake our claim on Sunningrocks once again. If we want to rebuild ThunderClan after the harsh seasons we've had, we will need every bit of territory and every piece of prey we can get."

"But why do we need to go now?" mewed Runningwind. "Couldn't we wait for a better time?"

Even in the predawn light, Ravenpaw saw Redtail's face darken at the impetuous tabby warrior's remark.

"There is no 'better time'," he mewed. "Now that RiverClan holds the

rocks, we should expect that they'll fight as hard to keep them as they did to take them. That means we'll need every advantage we can get. Bluestar and I have agreed that the best approach is to surprise them."

"So how do we do that?" asked Willowpelt.

Redtail swept his gaze around the clearing, taking in all the cats before him one by one. "Every day since they took Sunningrocks, RiverClan's dawn patrols have crossed the river to renew their new scent markers. They've been doing it early each morning before any of our patrols leave camp. Bluestar and I have been waiting until we could determine if the pattern of their movements would hold, but now, at last, she has determined that this is the time for us to act."

"Yes, yes, but none of that tells us anything," Runningwind observed.

"I was getting to that," replied Redtail. "We are going to get to Sunningrocks before our enemies can cross the river this morning. We'll place our own scent markers in their rightful places, and when the RiverClan cats arrive, we'll make our statement. Words are preferable, but claws may be required. Be ready for battle, but only use as much force as you need to drive them away without serious injury. Understand?"

All the warriors nodded, but the deputy's gaze lingered on Tigerclaw. It was hard to tell in the dark, but Ravenpaw thought he could see a warning in Redtail's eyes. Nevertheless, Redtail looked away a heartbeat later, and nothing came of it.

"Now come on. There's no time to lose," Redtail mewed, taking two steps toward the camp entrance.

As the other warriors turned to follow their deputy, Tigerclaw draped his tail across Ravenpaw's shoulders, ensuring his apprentice would stay back.

"I've given you a chance to prove yourself here," he whispered. "Don't mess it up. ThunderClan needs strong warriors now more than ever, not kits who still want to suckle on their mother's milk."

Ravenpaw's fur began to bristle at the accusation, but there was nothing he could do or say that would convince Tigerclaw to back down. The tabby tom had been trying to "help" Ravenpaw become a stronger fighter ever since he had begun training Ravenpaw, and he didn't care that his apprentice was shy and didn't want to harm any cat if he didn't have to. Tigerclaw believed that strength was the best way to solve every problem, even though Clan traditions often prioritized compassion and respect.

Ravenpaw could only hope that this latest warrior mission wouldn't end in disaster. Perhaps then Tigerclaw might see that there was another way after all.

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The sun still had yet to rise by the time the patrol reached the Sunningrocks, although the moonlight shining through the thinning treeline still allowed the cats to see.

Redtail raised his tail and swept it forward. "Go," he ordered. "We need to mark the whole area before RiverClan gets here."

The patrol fanned out around the rock pile, leaving ThunderClan scent all along the river and up to the edge of the forest. When they had finished, Redtail inspected their work and gave a quick nod.

"Very good," he declared.

But it won't be enough, Ravenpaw thought, dreading what he knew would happen next.

The sky was just showing the first hints of brightness as Redtail directed the warriors to hide in the bushes, as they had on the day RiverClan had first retaken the rocks. It didn't take long for the dark shapes of several cats to appear on the opposite bank of the river, and then for the water to ripple as those cats dived in. When they climbed back out near the Sunningrocks, Redtail silently signaled for his patrol to wait before moving.

In the slowly lightening sky, Ravenpaw saw that RiverClan's patrol was smaller than it had been the last time he had fought them,

consisting of only four warriors. The group of cats seemed more suited to checking a border than taking part in a battle for territory.

But then Ravenpaw remembered how many cats Redtail had brought with him—enough to give ThunderClan the advantage.

RiverClan's unprepared for us. Oh, StarClan, I hope no cat gets hurt . . .

The RiverClan cats stood around for a few moments before doing anything. As they shook the water out of their fur, the leader of the patrol, Oakheart, spoke first.

"Let's do this. We want to be out before those flea-ridden ThunderClan cats get here."

The tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat beside him raised her head, tasting the air for scents. "It smells like they've already been here, she remarked.

The other RiverClan warriors immediately stopped what they were doing and also tasted the air. A black tom was the first to notice the same thing his Clanmate had.

"Mosspelt's right. These aren't leftover scents from a patrol," he mewed cautiously. "These are border markers!"

"But that would mean . . ." Oakheart began.

Before the RiverClan deputy could finish his thought, Redtail signaled with his tail, and the ThunderClan warriors all surged forward at once. In the heat of the moment, Ravenpaw had no choice but to join in.

"It's an ambush!" Mosspelt yowled.

But instead of fighting straight away, Redtail halted a fox-length from Oakheart.

"What are you doing here?" Oakheart sneered. "This is our hunting ground now, as StarClan decreed it."

"RiverClan never needed to hunt here, and you will hunt here no

more. Crookedstar's folly has gone on for long enough. ThunderClan will not back down on this matter," replied Redtail.

Oakheart sniffed. "Then neither will RiverClan, until our ancestors' gift to us is returned for good."

Tigerclaw scoffed from his place by Redtail's side. "How can it be a gift to *you*? The river changed its path so we could get to the rocks more easily!"

Redtail turned his head to give Tigerclaw a stern glare, but the damage from the warrior's words was already done. The black RiverClan tom who had been the first to notice ThunderClan's scent markers took a step toward Tigerclaw, baring his teeth in a snarl and growling from the back of his throat.

"Blackclaw!" Oakheart hissed. "Stand down!"

But it was too late. Blackclaw had stepped too close to his adversary. Tigerclaw swiped a paw at him, and, after dodging and nearly losing his balance, the enemy warrior leaped forward with his claws unsheathed.

Redtail and Oakheart shared a look, as if neither deputy had expected the situation to get so bad so quickly, and yet there was nothing they could do. All around them, ThunderClan's and RiverClan's warriors had begun tussling with one another.

Ravenpaw could only watch in horror and bewilderment. This wasn't the first battle he had seen, and he had heard tales of dangerous fights from his Clan's elders almost as soon as he had been old enough to listen, but this was real. It wasn't a training session, in which every cat was always careful to avoid causing injuries, and even after all the times Tigerclaw had made him practice his battle moves, Ravenpaw knew that he just wasn't ready for this kind of warrior mission.

And I might not ever be, either, he thought despairingly.

But there was no time for him to consider that anymore. Tigerclaw had already swatted Blackclaw aside and lunged at Oakheart.

"Go back to your own territory, you flea-ridden water rat," the tabby tom mewed gruffly as he barreled into RiverClan's deputy and knocked him to the ground.

Oakheart lay winded at the base of the rock pile for several moments, and Redtail ran up through the chaos of the battle to stand over him.

"We can still end this now, Oakheart," he said. "Surely you don't want any of your Clan's warriors to die for these rocks?"

Oakheart rose to his paws. "No," he replied slowly, panting as he caught his breath.

Then, suddenly, he seemed to recover all at once, and he jumped toward Redtail with his forepaws raised to strike.

"I want ThunderClan's warriors to die!" he yowled.

He was only pretending to be dazed! Ravenpaw realized. He had been told that his enemies might use tricks and deception to win battles, but this was the first time he had actually seen it happen.

Luckily, Redtail moved out of Oakheart's way, leaving the RiverClan deputy to fight Tigerclaw instead. When Redtail whirled around to survey the battleground, searching for his next opponent, he noticed Ravenpaw standing nearby, still frozen in fear as the fighting carried on around him.

"Ravenpaw!" Redtail called, hurrying over to the apprentice. "Are you okay? Has any cat hurt you?"

Ravenpaw shook his head.

"I don't want to ask this, but can you fight? We need every able-bodied cat we can get," Redtail went on.

Ravenpaw hesitated. He could still remember the words Tigerclaw had spoken to him earlier that morning before they had left camp. It hadn't been the first time his mentor had accused him of not being strong enough to be a warrior, but it had still stung as deeply as if it were.

Still, as he stared into the kind face of his Clan's deputy, Ravenpaw knew there was only one answer he could give.

Tigerclaw only wants to fight, he told himself. *I don't.*

"No, Redtail. I can't. I'm sorry," he mewed meekly.

Redtail took a step closer and briefly draped his tail across Ravenpaw's shoulders. "I understand," he said. "You have nothing to apologize for. Tigerclaw should never have brought you here. This battle is far too dangerous for a mere apprentice."

"So what should I do?" Ravenpaw asked.

"Run and hide, Ravenpaw," Redtail replied. "Run back to camp if you can. Find somewhere where you'll be safe."

Those words were exactly what Ravenpaw had hoped Redtail would say, but a strange feeling of guilt washed over him nonetheless. Surely a true warrior would stay and defend his Clan no matter what . . .

"I shouldn't. Tigerclaw will be mad at me," he said, lowering his gaze so the deputy wouldn't see the shame in his eyes.

Redtail huffed out a chuckle. "You let me deal with him. I'll make sure he isn't too hard on you. Now go. That's an order, Ravenpaw."

"Th-thank you," Ravenpaw stuttered. Then he turned and sped off toward the tree line.

As soon as he was far enough into the forest to be out of sight of the fighting patrols, however, he skidded to a halt, digging his claws into the earth. Against his better judgment, he couldn't help but wonder how the fighting was going. Redtail had been right; the battle was an especially brutal one. Even if Ravenpaw couldn't fight, he still wanted to make sure his Clanmates could take care of themselves.

Maybe they'll need help, and I could bring reinforcements. Tigerclaw couldn't be too upset then.

So Ravenpaw doubled back, finding a place downwind of the rocks where no cat could see or scent him. As he crouched in the shade of a tree, letting his black pelt blend into the shadows, he observed that the situation had only fallen further into chaos since he had left it.

Amid the crowd of fighting cats, it was hard for Ravenpaw to distinguish any one warrior from another. Even so, he eventually identified two as they moved away from the others. Redtail had a gray RiverClan tom pinned beneath him, ready to swipe down at him with claws unsheathed, when Oakheart suddenly appeared out of nowhere to intervene.

"Stonefur!" the RiverClan deputy yowled, sinking his teeth into Redtail's scruff and tossing him aside. The gray cat—Stonefur, apparently—ran away to find a new fight. Oakheart stepped closer to the ThunderClan deputy and leaned down to whisper something in his ear. Ravenpaw strained to pick up the words as they just barely reached him.

"No ThunderClan cat will ever harm that warrior," Oakheart growled. The certainty in his tone sent a chill down Ravenpaw's spine.

What was that about? Ravenpaw wondered.

He never got a chance to find out.

Just as Oakheart had done to him earlier, Redtail suddenly leaped to his feet, attacking his opponent with a rage Ravenpaw had rarely seen from him. He kept Oakheart on the defensive and slowly but surely forced him toward the rock pile. Eventually, as the ThunderClan deputy cuffed him around the ears, Oakheart stumbled and fell, flopping down against a loose stone with a thud that seemed to knock the breath out of him.

For a moment, as Oakheart heaved himself to his feet, nothing appeared to have changed. Then, one by one, a few pebbles started to clatter to the ground, shaken loose from the larger rock pile. The pebbles than quickly gave way to larger stones, and even though the biggest rocks at the base of the pile didn't move, several of the

ones that were moving would still be enough to break bones, or to flatten any cat unlucky enough to be trapped beneath them.

"Rockslide!" Blackclaw yowled. "Get clear!"

Every cat ran for their lives, with ThunderClan heading toward the trees and RiverClan heading toward the river. As the edge of the rock pile began to crumble, however, the two Clan deputies remained locked in battle. At first, only small stones fell around them, but when a larger rock landed not far away from them, they finally pulled apart in surprise.

Ravenpaw tried to keep his gaze focused on Redtail, but he had to tear his attention away when the rest of the ThunderClan patrol came to a halt at the edge of the forest close by him. Tigerclaw, running slightly further than his Clanmates, even barreled into Ravenpaw distractedly, knocking the apprentice off his paws and surveying Ravenpaw with distaste as the younger tom clambered to his feet.

"Ravenpaw?" he grunted in surprise. "What are you doing here? Don't tell me you ran away!"

Ravenpaw gulped. Redtail had promised to help him deal with Tigerclaw's fury, but Redtail wasn't here now. Ravenpaw could already see himself being forced to pull off all the elders' ticks by himself.

Thankfully, Runningwind stepped between Tigerclaw and his apprentice. "Forget about him for now, Tigerclaw," he mewed. "We have a bigger problem. Where in StarClan is Redtail?"

The rest of the patrol looked around themselves, then at each other, as if they were only just realizing that their deputy hadn't joined them.

"The last time I saw him was when the rocks fell," Willowpelt put in. "Perhaps he's stuck."

"Or squashed," Darkstripe observed darkly.

Runningwind and Willowpelt turned to their Clanmate in shock,

clearly having taken offense to his statement, but a thoughtful expression crossed Tigerclaw's face for a moment.

"Don't worry," the brown tabby told his Clanmates. "I'll find him."

"Do . . . do you need help?" Ravenpaw asked, desperate to atone for what Tigerclaw had taken to be his cowardice.

But his mentor had already turned away.

"No, stay there," Tigerclaw said. "I'll talk to you later."

With a swish of his tail, he turned and bounded back to the rock pile. As the rest of the patrol watched, the dark brown tabby tom ducked behind a large piece of debris and disappeared.

"He's strong, all right," murmured Willowpelt. "And dedicated. If any cat can get Redtail out of a predicament, it'll be Tigerclaw."

Carefully keeping to the tree line, where his black pelt could blend into the shadows, Ravenpaw slunk through the forest and back in the direction of the Sunningrocks. When he stopped at the top of a small ridge, one just high enough to hide behind, he crouched down and peered into the dust cloud that had been thrown up by the falling rocks.

As he looked down on the Sunningrocks, he moved slightly until he had found just the right angle. Eventually, he could see a disheveled Redtail standing just in front of a heap of fallen stones as Tigerclaw bounded up to him. The ThunderClan deputy was saying something, but his voice was weak, as though the rockslide had stunned him, and Ravenpaw could only catch a few of the words.

"Tigerclaw . . . Oakheart . . . rocks . . . badly injured . . ."

The dark tabby warrior seemed to understand. "Show me," he mewed flatly.

Redtail ducked behind the small rock pile, and Tigerclaw followed close on his heels. Ravenpaw stayed in his place, waiting to see what would happen next.

Only moments later, Ravenpaw heard Redtail's voice call out Tigerclaw's name, a name which swiftly dissolved into a screech of surprise, followed by a hiss of pain. Then silence fell, and Ravenpaw heard nothing more for several agonizing seconds.

He crept slowly along the ridge once again, until he could see around the rock pile. The first thing he observed as he settled himself into place was his mentor Tigerclaw, who stood panting beside two forms that lay slumped on the ground next to one another. His claws were out, and his muzzle and front paws were stained with blood.

What in StarClan's name just happened? Ravenpaw asked himself.

Only then did he think to pay any attention to the bodies—for that was the only thing they could have been—on the ground. The larger one, its brown fur marred by dust and wounds, was half covered by a stone that had fallen on its hindquarters, but the other lay not far from Tigerclaw with a bite wound in its throat. The dead warrior's tortoiseshell pelt could have belonged to any number of cats, but his tail—

Ravenpaw stiffened, letting out an involuntary gasp. He'd have recognized that ginger tail anywhere.

Redtail! No, not Redtail!

Tigerclaw's head suddenly jerked upwards and swiveled toward Ravenpaw. Clearly, he had heard his apprentice's gasp. Ravenpaw ducked down below the top of the ridge as soon as he saw his mentor turning his way, and when he dared to peek out again after a few moments, the dark tabby had turned back to Redtail's body.

Ravenpaw quickly scurried back into the trees, catching up to the rest of the ThunderClan patrol with just enough time to compose himself and look innocent for when Tigerclaw emerged from the rock pile, carrying Redtail across his broad shoulders. Once he had reached the cover of the trees, he bent forward to let the deputy's body slide onto the dirt.

Redtail didn't move anymore than Ravenpaw had seen him do by

the rock pile mere moments earlier.

"What happened to Redtail?" Darkstripe asked incredulously.

"Is he—" Runningwind began at the same time.

Willowpelt remained silent. She carefully padded towards Redtail's body, laid a paw on his chest, and then pulled it away when she felt no heartbeat. She gingerly reached down, pausing twice along the way, and moved Redtail's head to the side so his neck wound could be exposed for his Clanmates to see.

"I'm sorry," Tigerclaw mewed, with a solemnity Ravenpaw had never seen from him before. "I was too late."

Willowpelt raised her head and let out a wail of grief. Runningwind moved a half step closer to Darkstripe. Ravenpaw hung his head.

Only Tigerclaw remained where he was, staring at the dead ThunderClan deputy with an expression that seemed to signal both regret and keen interest.

The sun may have been rising over the forest just then, but for Ravenpaw, the world had never been darker.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A full two days had passed since Rusty had met the wildcats, and the sun was setting on the third day as he stalked the alleys of the Twoleg town in search of a place to rest his tired legs.

He had been roaming the streets ever since he had returned from the forest, keeping his eyes and his nose open for signs of prey or tasty Twoleg scraps that BloodClan had yet to claim. If he could just keep himself fed, even a little, then he could turn his attention to the other thoughts weighing on his mind. Unfortunately, though, he had found little success in either area.

When Bluestar had given him an invitation to join her Clan, she obviously hadn't done so lightly. Her admission that ThunderClan was struggling to survive had seemed genuine, and Rusty felt confident that she hadn't been attempting to trick or trap him. If she had wanted to hurt or kill him, there was no reason she couldn't have just turned on him on the night they had met.

However, even if Rusty did join the Clan, he had no idea if he would be able to keep up with the cats there. His father had taught him a few fighting moves, but things weren't settled by claws in the Twolegplace—at least, not usually. BloodClan's rise had thrown everything off, but Rusty had known many cats who had been perfectly willing to live in peace with one another before Scourge and his followers had set them all on edge. That was the world he had been raised in. Would he really stand a chance in a forest where every cat seemed to constantly be on guard, ready to defend themselves at a moment's notice?

All things considered, Rusty thought, neither of his options seemed to be better than the other. If he stayed in the town, he would be hounded to the end of his days by BloodClan rogues who wanted to see him die, and since he had long ago resolved that he would never join them, death certainly seemed to be his only possible fate. And on top of that, since they knew he was Jake's son, Rusty could easily imagine that BloodClan would make his death as slow and

painful as they possibly could.

On the other paw, if he requested a place in ThunderClan, he would have a home, but he would always be known as an outsider, and the Clan might never truly think of him as one of their own. It had never been the way of the cats in the town to be too friendly with anyone other than their closest kin, but Rusty had still known that at least he was bonded to the cats around him by their shared struggle to survive. He hadn't met very many Clan cats, but the ones he had met had seemed perfectly capable of taking care of themselves without having to rely on Twolegs or scavenge from scrapcans.

If he did go to join them, perhaps he could one day learn how to do the same. But then again, Bluestar had given him no guarantee that her Clan would accept an outsider like him. She hadn't seemed entirely sure that he had what it took to be a Clan cat, even though he thought he had impressed her with his independence and his fighting skill, however basic that skill was.

In fact, if I put it that way, he mused, *it almost sounds like I* should *just stay. Surely it would be better to face an enemy I know than a whole forest's worth of cats I don't . . . right?*

No answer came—but then, Rusty hadn't expected to hear one.

Raising his head, he glanced in the direction of the forest. He opened his mouth to see if he could scent the trees, or the prey and the cats that lived beneath them, but the horrible reek of Twolegs and their stuff flooded his senses instead.

Rusty shuddered, swiping his tongue around his jaws in an effort to get rid of the taste of Twoleg rubbish. *At least the forest cats don't have to smell that all day.*

At the same time, looking up at the sky just made Rusty realize that it was almost dark. Just as he had the previous two days, without having found any scrapcans he could freely eat out of, he told himself that he would just have to give up and go to sleep hungry again. He turned down another street, hoping that at least he could find a nice place to rest for the night, only to pull up short as a

shrill screech of pain split the air.

Rusty jumped up onto a nearby fence, creeping slowly along it past multiple Twoleg gardens. The screech came again, louder this time, and Rusty knew he was getting closer. At last, in the dying light, he finally got close enough to see what was happening.

Three BloodClan cats had surrounded another cat and were pummeling it with their paws. They didn't seem to have their claws out, but Rusty knew that at any moment that could change.

As he inched even closer, the group of BloodClan cats parted just enough for him to make out their faces. One was a ginger tom that Rusty remembered as being called Brick, but he didn't recognize the two other cats Brick had brought with him. One was a black-and-white tom, and the other was a tabby she-cat with only one eye. The other had clearly been clawed out by some other creature long ago.

Even as Rusty recoiled at sight of the she-cat's gaping old wound, what truly surprised him was the sight of the cat Brick and his friends had attacked.

That's Smudge! A jolt of surprise shot through Rusty's pelt as his hackles raised. With all his distraction over his meeting with ThunderClan, he hadn't realized how close he was to Smudge's Twoleg den. The den was still some ways down the street, so Smudge had clearly been wandering, but he hadn't gone too far.

So why are they going after him? He's harmless!

In the end, Rusty decided that it didn't matter. Whenever BloodClan attacked a street cat, that cat at least had a chance of defending themselves. But kittypets never trained to fight or defend territory. There was no way that a cat like that, especially one as young as Smudge, could beat back three full-grown experienced fighters.

As though his thoughts had forced him into motion, Rusty suddenly found himself slinking along the fence, moving slowly so as not to catch the BloodClan cats' attention. He didn't know why he was doing it; he just knew he was tired of watching these rogues act as

if the whole world belonged to them.

Luckily, the BloodClan cats were so focused on Smudge that they didn't notice Rusty, even when he was almost on top of them. When he was close enough, he jumped down from the fence, sinking his claws into Brick's back and managing to scratch him a few times before the older cat bucked and threw him off. Rusty hit the ground and rolled for a few tail-lengths before he came to a stop. He quickly rose to his paws, shaking his head to clear it as all three BloodClan cats turned to him.

The sun had almost fully set, but there was still just enough light for Brick to recognize his attacker. "You again!" he snarled. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question," Rusty shot back. "But your quarrel is with me now. Leave this cat alone."

Brick grunted, as though he didn't really care who he was fighting one way or the other. "Fine by me. Fury, Snake, get him!"

His two allies advanced on Rusty, their eyes gleaming with menace in the gathering dusk and their tails twitching back and forth with anticipation. Rusty stood his ground, although privately he didn't like what he was up against. Why had he been so willing to jump into this fight again? It hadn't involved him at first, after all.

Then Rusty turned his head briefly, catching sight of Smudge cowering not far away with his head between his forepaws, and he found new resolve within himself.

Before the BloodClan cats could act, Rusty shot forward and raked his claws across the black-and-white tom's cheek. The other cat pulled up short, hissing in pain, and Rusty took the opportunity to spin around and swipe the tabby she-cat's front legs out from under her. They both recovered quickly, but Rusty had already raced over to stand protectively between Brick and Smudge.

"I told you. Leave while you still can," he mewed sternly, trying to put more confidence in his voice than he actually felt.

Brick glared back at him, then scoffed and turned his head away. "Yeah, alright, cat. You're not worth the trouble. We just wanted to teach this worthless piece of fluff to respect our territory, and it looks like we've done that." He lifted a paw to indicate Smudge.

"So get going," Rusty replied in the same fierce tone he had just used.

"Whatever," Brick grunted. He held up his tail, and the two other BloodClan cats, who had been stalking toward Rusty again, stopped. Brick turned to leave, and they followed suit.

Before any of them had taken more than two paw steps, however, Brick turned back to gaze coldly at Rusty. "We're leaving now, but we'll be back," he promised. "You can expect that. Both of you. And if either of you are here when we do come back—" He trailed off, dragging a paw across his throat with unsheathed claws. He didn't have to say anymore.

With that, Brick and his friends padded away into the night. It wasn't exactly a victory, Rusty mused, but he was more than willing to take it.

After several moments had passed, Rusty tore his eyes away from the street and prodded Smudge gently in the side. "They're gone now. You're safe. It's okay," he told the kittypet gently.

Smudge removed his paws from in front of his face and stared up at Rusty with wide, wondering eyes. "You . . . you saved me," he mewed.

"Yeah, I guess I did," Rusty murmured noncommittally.

"But why?" the other cat asked, shaking out his pelt as he slowly emerged from behind the scrapcan.

Rusty shrugged. "I dunno. It just felt like the right thing to do, I guess."

Smudge cast a regretful glance over his shoulder at the entrance to his Twolegs' den. "Of all the rotten luck," he grumbled. "Of course this would happen when my housefolk leave for the day. If they

were here, they'd have chased those bad cats away."

Rusty wasn't sure that it was a good idea to rely on Twolegs for help, but he didn't want to ruin Smudge's sense of safety. Instead, he just grunted noncommittally. "Maybe. But either way, you should probably get back before anything else happens out here."

"You're right," Smudge admitted, clambering shakily to his paws. "But what about you? What are you going to do now? You heard that cat. He's going to come after you!"

Rusty shrugged. "They were already after me. We don't have the best relationship."

A mixture of admiration and concern crossed Smudge's face. "But then where will you go? If they're looking for you, nowhere around here will be safe."

"Who knows?" Rusty replied. "But it won't matter. I might not live here much longer anyway."

"Do you want to sleep in my housefolks' den tonight?" Smudge asked. "I'm sure they won't mind taking in another cat. I've got the best food, and you can share my nest . . ."

His voice trailed off as he realized Rusty wasn't looking as enthusiastic as he had probably been hoping.

For a moment, Rusty felt bad that he couldn't be more excited about Smudge's idea. He had been happy living with Twolegs once, hadn't he? When he had still been with his mother and his littermates, everything had been cozy and soft, but the Twoleg who had taken him in afterwards had never quite been able to provide the same comforts.

Perhaps he could have been happy in a new den with new housefolk once, Rusty thought to himself, but now that he had been on his own for so long—now that he had tasted the life of a wild cat—he just couldn't see himself going back.

"I'm sorry, Smudge," he mewed, softly but firmly. "I know I used to be a Twoleg pet, but that part of my life is behind me. I don't

associate with housefolk these days."

Even as a crestfallen look crossed his face, the young black-and-white tom still managed to nod in understanding. "Okay, then. But where will you go?"

Rusty remained silent for several long moments. It had felt good to drive the BloodClan cats away, he thought. He didn't relish the idea of fighting like they seemed to, but he knew he would fight them or any other cat if he needed to. And after how Brick had repeated Bone's threat that BloodClan would track Rusty down, and after how BloodClan had already laid claim to most of the good scrapcans in the town, Rusty couldn't help but wonder if there was really any reason left for him to stay there.

The ThunderClan cats may not have been sure he was fit to join them, but they had at least been willing to give him a chance. Maybe, Rusty thought, he should take them up on their offer. What was the worst that could happen?

"Like I said," he finally replied to Smudge's question, "there's nothing left for me here. I have to embrace my destiny. I have to go out into the forest. I have to be a real cat."

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Rusty awoke early the next morning, just as dawn was beginning to break. Blinking in the sunlight shining down between the Twoleg dens, he arched his back in a long stretch. The pile of discarded pelts he had found to sleep on had been comfortable enough, but there must have been something harder underneath them, because Rusty's joints felt awfully stiff. He paced back and forth for a few moments, and thankfully the pain seemed to ease.

In the light of the rising sun, Rusty's gaze drifted toward the fence that hid Smudge's Twoleg's den from his view. Against his better judgment, despite what he had said the previous night, he still couldn't help but ask himself if things really could have been different.

What would his life have been like, he wondered, if he had stayed a

house pet forever? If he had gone to a different Twoleg, would he have been taken care of better? Or would he have found a reason to leave and survive on his own regardless?

Rusty shook his head to clear it. However much he might want things to be different, they weren't, and it wouldn't do him any good to dwell too much on the past.

"Good morning!"

The sound of a cheerful voice from above him snapped Rusty out of his reverie. Glancing up, he saw Smudge staring down at him from the top of his Twolegs' fence. The black-and-white cat looked none the worse for wear after his encounter with BloodClan the previous day. His pelt was sleek and shiny once again—clearly he had groomed it—and his eyes were bright with happiness, although he still took a good look around the area before he leaped down from the fence, almost as though he were making sure no rogues would jump out at him.

Rusty dipped his head. "Good morning, Smudge. Did you sleep well?"

He was surprised at how easily the words came to his lips, but he decided that the feeling wasn't *all* bad. This young kittypet was certainly easier to talk to than Bone or any of his followers.

"Well enough, thanks," Smudge replied. "But I don't think I'll be ranging that far from my housefolks' den again. Their garden is enough for me."

Rusty tilted his head, surprised that any cat could manage to be content with such a small space. "You really don't want to go anywhere?" he mewed. "Wouldn't it get boring seeing the same sights every day? There's a whole world out there to explore."

Smudge shrugged. "I guess I've never thought about it that way. But I can't go anywhere else. I've made friends with all the cats around here, and sometimes I go visit them in their gardens. I just think I'd be scared to go to any place I don't know about. There are all kinds of dangers out in the world. Besides, my housefolk would be sad if I

left, and without their food, I might starve. And then there are all those vicious rogues . . ." A ripple of fear passed through his pelt as his last sentence hung unfinished in the air.

Even though he could see where Smudge was coming from, Rusty couldn't agree with what the young kittypet had said. "Maybe that really is enough for you, but I'm sure it wouldn't be enough for me."

"So you can go exploring all on your own, then. I can't stop you," Smudge mewed. "But I'll still be staying right here."

Rusty laughed. "That's okay. Everything you just said is probably true. But it's not like that with me. I've been all over this town by now, remember? And even where I'm planning to go next, I know things won't be completely bad."

"Is this about what you said last night? When . . . when you wanted to go into the wild?"

"Yes," Rusty replied. "A few nights ago, I met some forest cats. And no"—he held up a paw to forestall Smudge's questions—"they weren't all that dangerous. Well, they did try to fight me, but only because I almost crossed into their territory. Once I agreed to respect their borders, they calmed down, and they told me all about their Clan."

Smudge looked more confused than ever. "What's a Clan?"

"A group of wild cats, I suppose. I didn't get all the details, but it sounded as though there are four Clans in the forest. The cats I met came from one called ThunderClan. They patrol their territory, and they help one another catch prey, but they always have to be prepared to fight in case another Clan tries to take what they have," Rusty mewed.

"And you actually want to go there?" Smudge shook his head. "I can't think why. It all seems far too complicated to me."

Rusty chuckled, amused despite himself. Perhaps he shouldn't have expected a pampered kittypet like Smudge to grasp the appeal of warrior life when he had never had to hunt or fight for himself.

"Complicated or not, I'm still going. I've been offered a place in ThunderClan, and I plan to take it. Whatever happens after that, at least I won't have to worry about Twolegs or BloodClan anymore."

Smudge was silent for a long time, lowering his eyes to the ground. Then he turned to Rusty again with a serious expression on his face. "Is it weird if I say I'll miss you? I know we haven't known each other for too long, and maybe you didn't like me at the start, but I don't have a lot of cats I can just talk to like this."

Rusty thought about that. "I don't think so. And I know there are things about this place that I'll miss. The food wasn't all bad, when BloodClan wasn't taking all of it. And I'd definitely rather have the last cat I interact with be you, rather than one of those black-hearted rogues."

Smudge shrugged. "Fair enough. I can relate to that last part."

"Will you be okay?" Rusty asked. "If BloodClan comes after you again, I mean."

Smudge briefly seemed unsure. "Probably. I haven't heard of them going into gardens or attacking house cats. I think they only went after me because I was on the street. I wonder why . . ."

"Maybe they don't want the Twolegs to come after them," Rusty pointed out. "Besides, you kittypets aren't going to be much of a threat to them. We saw that yesterday."

"Maybe," Smudge agreed. Then he hesitated again.

"Rusty," he finally asked, "would it be too weird if I asked you to spend this morning with me? I know we come from different places and don't know each other all that well, and I know you'll be leaving soon, but it would make me feel better if we had a proper goodbye. And besides, I think you should get to have one last good memory of this place. Don't you?"

It was a strange offer, Rusty admitted to himself, and one he may not have taken under any other circumstances, but he could hardly refuse Smudge now. Smudge had said that he wanted to give Rusty

a good last memory of the town, but privately Rusty thought that what Smudge actually wanted was to have some cat around so he could feel safe from BloodClan.

Either way, though, Rusty didn't want to say no. He had some time left before he had to meet the ThunderClan cats, and he may as well spend it relaxing. It would save him a lot of stress, and he would be helping a cat who clearly needed it. Perhaps it was even what his father would have done. But no matter the reason, Rusty had already made his choice.

"Sure," Rusty said, making sure to put a cheerful smile on his face. "I'd like that . . . friend."

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Rusty spent the rest of that morning with Smudge, visiting the younger cat's favorite haunts. Smudge took him along the fence, showing him which Twolegs would leave treats out for cats and which gardens had the best trees for scratching and sharpening claws. Rusty took it all in with a light smile on his face, knowing that even if he couldn't see why Smudge liked all these things, he should still try to show interest. They even met a few kittypets, most of whom simply dozed in the sun without even realizing other cats were passing, but a few did attempt to start up a cordial yet cold conversation, which Rusty joined in easily enough. It all served him well as a glimpse into a life he might have had, but it also showed him how he would only have felt cramped and uncomfortable if he had had to live with Twolegs for all his days.

By the time Smudge finally left and headed back to his housefolk, there was still a fair amount of time to go before sunhigh. Rusty padded cautiously to the edge of the alley and, after turning his head one way and then the other to ensure no cat would leap out at him, padded out into the light.

He glanced around the street in front of him, feeling as though he were truly seeing it for the first time in his life. Now that he had made the choice to leave it all behind, he realized, he was looking at the town not as a dangerous place filled with vicious rogues, but instead as simply a part of the world, just like anywhere else. With

that in mind, Rusty found that he was suddenly noticing all sorts of little things. He saw the leaves of some nearby trees rustling in the light morning breeze, and he watched a small bird as it settled on a fence before launching itself into flight again as a Twoleg monster roared past with a pair of the furless creatures visible through the transparent parts of its body.

Rusty shuddered. He had never felt comfortable with the strange creatures Twolegs liked to climb inside of and ride around in, but the monsters never seemed to leave the strips of black stuff that lay on all the streets, so Rusty had simply learned not to walk on the stuff when monsters were around. Even so, he still knew that the constant roaring and rushing about of the monsters was something he wouldn't miss when he was in the forest with ThunderClan.

Padding back to the end of the alley, Rusty leaped up onto the fence that overlooked the forest. He sat there for a heartbeat, taking in the view, then jumped down onto the other side of the fence. A tingle of relief spread through him as his paws touched soft dirt rather than cold hard stone.

As Rusty gazed into the trees, he found it easy to forget that there even was a Twoleg town behind him, or that there was anything in the world at all beyond the new territory he was about to take his first steps into.

Before he actually moved anywhere, though, Rusty's stomach rumbled, as if to remind him that he hadn't actually eaten anything yet that day. He pricked his ears and opened his mouth to taste the air for prey, and luckily he didn't have to wait long before a small mouse came scampering out of the brush and into the open. Rusty slowly made his way toward the mouse, making sure to stay downwind of his prey and that it had padded well away from the ThunderClan border, before he bunched his legs and pounced, killing the mouse with one swift bite and devouring it in only a few more.

His stomach comfortably filled for the moment, Rusty settled down to groom his fur as he waited for sunhigh to arrive. It wouldn't do to have himself looking like a scruffy rogue when he met with ThunderClan again, he told himself. Then, as soon as the sun was

directly over his head, Rusty padded up to the treeline, not entirely sure what he should do next.

He took a few tentative steps forward, then halted to taste the air. The scent of ThunderClan cats was all around him, with most of it concentrated on the rocks and bushes that seemed to mark the edge of their territory. Rusty also thought that he could still detect the stale scents of Graypaw, Lionheart, and Bluestar from the night he had met them, but the traces were so faint that he couldn't be sure.

As Rusty padded slowly along the border, however, he eventually came to the spot where he and Graypaw had had their fight. All of a sudden, the breeze shifted, blowing over Rusty's pelt and ruffling his fur. When Rusty tasted the air again, he found a familiar scent washing over him, so strong that it couldn't have been left there too long before. If Rusty could believe his nose, the cat he was looking for would be somewhere nearby.

"Lionheart?" he called hesitantly. "Hello?"

For a few moments, nothing happened, and Rusty started to ask himself whether he might have been mistaken. *Did I only smell what I wanted to smell?*

Then there was a stirring at the base of a bush just inside ThunderClan's territory, and the golden tabby warrior Bluestar had promised to send to meet Rusty slid out from its branches.

"Not bad, youngster," he mewed. "But you still have a lot to learn. Your tracking is decently keen, and you can certainly tell fesh scents from stale ones, but you ought to be more alert if you want to stay safe around here. Even the tiniest Clan kit knows when another cat is nearby."

Rusty dipped his head, recognizing the truth in the warrior's words. Were his tests to join the Clan already beginning?

"Let's try something else," Lionheart went on, not unkindly. "Can you tell if I am alone?"

Rusty sniffed again. "You haven't brought Bluestar or Graypaw with

you," he replied. Then he stiffened as a new scent hit his nose. "But you did bring some other cat, didn't you?"

Lionheart chuckled. "Again, not bad." He turned back to the bush he had emerged from and called, "Come out!"

He swept his tail in Rusty's direction, and a moment later, another cat crawled out into the open. It was a tom, with a pelt as white as snow and eyes the color of sunbaked yellow sand. As the newcomer rose to his paws, from his scent and the muscles on his bones, Rusty could tell he had to be another warrior. His pelt began to prickle uneasily.

"Calm down!" Lionheart urged him. "Your fear-scent will stink up the whole forest. We are only here to take you to our camp, nothing more."

Rusty forced his fur to lie flat and did his best to meet the white tom's gaze. He was reassured when he saw that, much like Lionheart, this cat held only warmth in his eyes, rather than anger. It was a welcome change from how Bone and BloodClan had always treated him, Rusty decided.

"This is Whitestorm," said Lionheart.

The other tom dipped his head. "So you're the cat Bluestar mentioned. I've heard a lot about you. I must admit, I wasn't sure any cat from Twolegplace could make it as one of us, but you clearly haven't been a coddled pet for some time now."

Rusty raised one paw to scratch absentmindedly at his collar as he looked down at the ground. Whitestorm's words, though harsh, hadn't been meant as an insult, but they still sent an odd mixture of pride and embarrassment rippling through Rusty's pelt.

"Yes, it's all well and good, but we shouldn't stay out here. We can talk once we're in the camp," Lionheart advised.

"Quite right," agreed Whitestorm. He turned and strode into the forest, and Lionheart beckoned Rusty to follow with his tail as he himself did the same. Not wanting to be left behind on unfamiliar

territory, Rusty hastened to keep up.

The two warriors didn't try to accommodate Rusty's pace; instead, they moved through the undergrowth as swiftly as if they knew every paw step of it by heart. They scrambled over fallen trees and through dips in the forest floor, and Rusty fought to keep them in sight, even when his shorter legs meant he couldn't run as fast or leap as high or as far as they could. Even when Lionheart and Whitestorm splashed their way through puddles of foul-smelling brown water, Rusty did so too, trying not to wince as the dirty drops hit his pelt and soaked into his belly fur.

Finally, when the two warriors came to a halt in front of a large rock next to a small ravine, Rusty stopped not far behind them. Thankfully, they seemed to realize he was out of breath, and Lionheart gave Rusty a chance to recover from their journey before he turned to face him again.

"We are very close to the camp now," he meowed. "Where do you suppose it is?"

Rusty wasn't sure. He leaned his head forward to try and peer into the ravine, but he couldn't see anything through the line of bushes that ringed the hollow. Even as he looked for signs of life among the trees, everything he saw just looked like more of the same empty forest to him.

"Use your nose," Lionheart prompted him. "You must be able to scent it!"

Rusty parted his lips again to taste the air and found that he could, in fact, detect cat-scent around him—but not the sort of cat-scent he had been used to encountering in the Twoleg town. Back there, every cat had either smelled like Twolegs or their rubbish. Here, the cat-scent Rusty could taste smelled more like trees and the blood of forest prey, and it didn’t take long for Rusty to realize that the scent wasn't just coming from Lionheart and Whitestorm. Instead, it came most strongly from the ravine that Rusty had dismissed moments ago.

Not wanting to look as though he had given up too quickly, he gave

a thoughtful nod and announced, "I can smell cats. Lots of them. Down there."

"Very good," Lionheart meowed. "In time, you will learn to recognize every cat-scent in ThunderClan by name, as all our kits must do. For now, Whitestorm and I will simply introduce you to our Clanmates."

He whisked his tail at the white warrior, and Whitestorm picked his way down the tumble of boulders that lined the ravine to a prickly patch of gorse along its wall. Rusty hadn't noticed it before, but he saw now that there was a hole in the gorse, just wide enough for a full-grown cats to squeeze through without scraping their pelt off.

As Whitestorm stepped into the tunnel, Lionheart turned to Rusty. "You can still turn back," he went on. "Bluestar will not think less of you, and no other cats will even know you were thinking of joining us. But if you step into the camp, you will not be able to leave without making yourself seem weak in front of our whole Clan, and you will never be able to return to our territory. I know you have already learned some tricks for fighting and hunting on your own, but if you do not think you can make it through our training, it may be better for you to leave quietly while you still have a chance."

If Rusty was being honest, Lionheart's offer did seem tempting. He had been so certain at the beginning of the day that ThunderClan was where his destiny lay, but after his race through the trees with these warriors, some of his doubts had returned. Still, he did his best to meet Lionheart's gaze as calmly as he could.

"I won't leave yet," he mewed determinedly. "There's nothing left for me where I've come from. Whatever happens next, whether you keep me around or not, I may as well give this a try."

Lionheart dipped his head. "I admire your courage, young one. If you wish to find a place here, you will surely need it."

Rusty gave a small nod of assent, and Lionheart turned to pad through the tunnel after Whitestorm. Underneath the gorse, he found that the ground had been worn into a flat, broad track. *Cats must have walked this path for seasons,* he thought.

But even with that in mind, he was hardly prepared for what he saw when he emerged into the camp itself. The clearing in the center of the ravine was bare hard earth; like the gorse tunnel, it must have been trodden by untold generations of warriors. Here and there, the edges of the camp were dotted with bushes, rocks, and tree stumps, with cats lounging on or around them. They were all relaxed, sharing prey and grooming one another, but none of them seemed to have noticed Rusty yet. There didn't seem to be too many cats around, but Rusty still knew there were more cats here than had ever gathered in the Twoleg town, outside of BloodClan. Despite what he had told Lionheart a moment ago, a sense of dread swept over him.

It's all so . . . organized, Rusty thought to himself. *Did I really make the right choice? What place could there possibly be for me here?*

CHAPTER NINE

Graypaw ducked his head as he moved through the gorse tunnel into ThunderClan's camp, two plump young mice swaying back and forth as he gripped their tails tightly between his teeth. Dustpaw and Sandpaw followed him, each with prey of their own for the fresh-kill pile, and last of all came Mousefur and Longtail. Graypaw's paws ached and his tail drooped with tiredness, but he still felt the pride he had always been told would come from providing for his Clan.

The apprentices had woken up that morning to find that their denmate Ravenpaw had already left for the Sunningrocks with Tigerclaw and Redtail. Dustpaw had complained that his "useless" brother had been allowed to go when he hadn't, only subsiding when Bluestar had threatened to have him pick all the elders' ticks off by himself. Then, when Lionheart and Sandpaw's mentor Whitestorm had suddenly headed out on a secret mission of their own for Bluestar, Graypaw, Sandpaw, and Dustpaw had all thought they would have to stay in camp the whole day, until ThunderClan's leader had rounded up a few warriors to take them hunting.

"If the prey is running well again, we should take advantage of that blessing," Bluestar had said, and as Graypaw reflected on the successful patrol, he knew that no cat could accuse him and the others of not following their leader's instructions.

The cats all deposited their catches on the pile, and Longtail went to let the queens and elders know that they could eat. The tabby warrior had always made it a point to ensure that queens and elders were fed before all the Clan's other cats, as the warrior code dictated. He had done so almost ever since he was made a warrior, for reasons that Graypaw suspected went beyond ordinary compassion and tradition. Still, he knew better than to ask about what was obviously a very personal topic.

Sandpaw and Dustpaw relaxed together in the shade, chatting about something or other, but Graypaw chose not to join them. He

wondered if he could slip out of camp and make his way to the RiverClan border. Maybe, if he was lucky, he'd even be able to catch a glimpse of Silverpaw on a border patrol. They wouldn't be able to talk or play, but a few moments of eye contact would be more than enough for Graypaw.

When Graypaw glanced up into the sky, however, he realized that sunhigh had already passed. No Clan would be sending out any more border patrols until the evening. He could still have gone to the river and hoped to see his friend hunting, but there was less guarantee of that, as those patrols were much more random and spread out.

Graypaw instead chose to simply remain in camp. He stayed close enough to the other two apprentices that he could join in with their discussion if he wanted to, but not so close that they'd expect him to. He let his eyes drift around the camp, and he was surprised to see Whitestorm and Lionheart pad into camp, followed closely by—

It can't be.

Can it?

The third cat to pass through the tunnel wasn't from ThunderClan, or any other Clan for that matter. It was Rusty, the ginger kittypet Graypaw had met only a few days earlier.

But what's he doing here? the gray apprentice wondered. *I know Bluestar invited him to join us, but I never thought he'd actually do it!*

Rusty seemed reluctant to move into the camp clearing, as if he too was still unsure about his decision to walk in. His wide-eyed expression betrayed the mixture of awe and intimidation that must have been roiling inside his head. The thought reminded Graypaw of the first time he had ventured out of the nursery as a kit. Even under his mother's protective gaze, the camp had still felt daunting to him, as though he had walked into a strange new world.

But you were prepared for what to expect there as soon as you opened your eyes, he reminded himself. *This cat doesn't know what he's gotten himself into at all. Just think what he must be feeling!*

Whitestorm paused and laid his tail across Rusty's shoulders in a comforting gesture, while Lionheart turned his head to gaze at the ginger tom sympathetically. Ultimately, Rusty steeled himself enough to step out of the shadow of the prickly gorse bushes and into the camp itself. He still kept his eyes low, as if he was afraid to meet any other cat's gaze, but he didn't truly need to worry. Most of the cats in the clearing, save for Graypaw, were either engaged in conversation, dozing in the sun, or licking one another clean in the way Clan cats often did.

Meanwhile, Lionheart was speaking to Rusty, and Graypaw perked up his ears to listen.

"Look around, Rusty. Just after sunhigh, when the day is hottest, is the time for sharing tongues," Lionheart mewed.

"Sharing tongues?" the younger cat echoed.

"Yes," put in Whitestorm. "When our borders have been marked for the morning and the first hunting patrols have returned with their prey, we always take time to let ourselves rest. We groom each other, we share news, and we let ourselves relax for a while. It is a custom that binds all the Clan's members together."

At the sound of the conversation, a few of the ThunderClan cats looked up, surprise flickering across their faces as they noticed the strange newcomer in their camp. Some of them parted their jaws to taste his scent, recoiling slightly when they realized where he had come from. Rusty hung his head, seemingly unwilling to meet any of their gazes. Whitestorm and Lionheart waited patiently for several heartbeats until Rusty raised his eyes again, and Lionheart continued describing the camp.

The golden warrior pointed with his tail to the bramble den where Frostfur and her kits were resting, alongside the pale ginger she-cat Goldenflower and her black-and-white son Swiftkit.

"Over there is the nursery. That is where the kits are cared for," Graypaw's mentor meowed.

"Our Clan's mother cats are known as queens, and they share the

care of all ThunderClan kits between them," Whitestorm put in. "It's just one of the ways our cats serve the Clan."

Lionheart nodded gravely. "All able-bodied cats must serve the Clan in whatever way they can. Loyalty above all is at the core of our warrior code, which you must learn if you wish to stay here."

At the sound of the senior warrior's words, Graypaw felt his skin crawl, remembering his thoughts of Silverpaw from just moments earlier. In an effort to not look suspicious, he did his best to push his discomfort out of his mind and focus on Rusty once again.

As Lionheart and Whitestorm continued to walk him across the camp, pointing out more of the dens, more and more cats began to take notice of the kittypet. The queens wrapped their tails tightly around their kits, the warriors stood and tensed their muscles, and Dustpaw and Sandpaw stared at Rusty with undisguised contempt. Before any cat could move or make an accusation, however, Lionheart opened his jaws to taste the air, as though a new scent had caught his attention.

"Here comes Bluestar," he said. "She must have noticed we've returned."

The rest of the Clan waited tensely as, after a heartbeat, their leader poked her head out of her den. Once she saw Rusty, she padded purposefully across the clearing to join the two warriors who had brought him into the camp.

"So he came," she observed, somehow managing to sound relieved and collected at the same time.

Lionheart dipped his head. "Whitestorm was sure he wouldn't."

Even though Graypaw had detected a hint of warmth in her tone before, the Clan leader's tail-tip began to twitch impatiently at her warrior's light banter.

"Well, then," she mewed. "What do you think of him?"

"He may be scrawnier than any of our apprentices, but he kept up well on the journey here despite his size. Once he has been properly

fed, he should be able to hold his own," Whitestorm replied.

"And you know my opinion. We both saw him tangle with Graypaw. His form may be clumsy and slow, but I do believe he has a warrior's spirit," Lionheart added.

Bluestar seemed to take this into consideration; Graypaw knew that she greatly valued the white tom's opinion. The elders had told him that Whitestorm had been the only kit of Bluestar's sister, Snowfur, who had tragically died moons before the terrible leaf-bare the Clan had just endured.

"So you both agree with me?" Bluestar asked. Her hushed mew barely carried across the camp to Graypaw's ears. "He is fit to be trained to become one of us?"

After only a few heartbeats, the warriors both nodded.

Bluestar huffed out a resigned breath. "Very well. Then so be it. I must make the announcement to the Clan."

In one motion, she turned back toward her den and leapt on top of the rock that hung over her den. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!" she yowled.

The cats in the camp moved closer together in anticipation. Even so, Graypaw still noticed that no cat seemed especially eager to sit by Rusty. After a moment, feeling sorry for the other young cat, Graypaw moved closer to the ginger tom. Rusty startled when he noticed Graypaw slide into place next to him, but a look of recognition and gratitude flashed across his face when he realized who the newcomer was. Before he could say anything, though, Bluestar spoke again, and all attention returned to the Highrock.

"As you all know," the Clan leader began, "ThunderClan needs more warriors. Many of our oldest and strongest Clanmates did not survive the last leaf-bare, and we have barely enough full-grown cats to patrol our borders. Our four apprentices will not be made warriors for several moons, and the few kits we have in our nursery will take even longer. With RiverClan's latest attempt to take

Sunningrocks, and the strange goings-on in ShadowClan, it is my responsibility as your leader to make sure you will be protected."

As Bluestar kept on talking, Graypaw spotted some of his Clanmates giving each other slightly confused looks. Nothing Bluestar was saying was new to them, Graypaw knew, but after what he had heard her say several nights before when he had first met Rusty, Graypaw supposed she was just trying to make sure her cats knew how important the situation was before she made her announcement.

That announcement came just moments later, as Bluestar paused, scanned the crowd of cats before her, and let out a deep sigh before continuing.

"Fortunately, I have found a cat who wishes to join our Clan. He has agreed to leave his life as a loner behind and commit himself fully to training with us and learning our ways. Lionheart and Whitestorm have vouched for him, and I have decided to allow him into our camp so long as he can prove his full loyalty will now lie with us."

Before she had even finished speaking, the cats of ThunderClan had begun to murmur among themselves in disbelief and indignation.

Bluestar did her best to ignore the commotion. "Some of you may have already noticed the young cat Lionheart and Whitestorm brought here this morning. His name is Rusty, and although he once made a home in the Twolegplace, he is willing to become a ThunderClan apprentice."

"Lucky to become an apprentice, you mean!" interrupted a harsh voice from somewhere in the crowd.

Bluestar glared in the direction of the exclamation, but like Graypaw, she couldn't seem to tell which cat had cried out.

"Regardless, two of our senior warriors have assured me he will be able to fit into Clan life, and I myself have seen his skills at hunting and fighting. Once he is trained, he may very well make a formidable warrior."

"But what if he fails to complete his training, or leaves because life here is too hard?" Brindleface yowled. "If we teach him our warrior skills, and he doesn't stick around, he could show up later to steal our prey!"

"Or share our secrets with the other Clans!" added Frostfur. "What if ShadowClan learns of our weaknesses? Who will protect my kits?" she finished, glancing back apprehensively at Thornkit, Brightkit, Brackenkit, and Cinderkit huddled in the entrance to the nursery.

Graypaw looked beside him at Rusty to find that a nervous expression had appeared on the young cat's face and fear-scent was pulsing from his pelt. Graypaw couldn't believe that a cat like Rusty would ever want to hurt kits or steal any other cat's territory, but he had also heard all sorts of stories from the elders about the things rogues could do when they were desperate to survive, or even simply greedy. As much as Graypaw didn't want to admit it, he could understand why his Clanmates were reacting so vehemently to the idea that Rusty might join them. Still, he did his best to put on a brave face for the ginger tom's sake, and as Rusty stared back at Graypaw, he did seem to grow a little calmer.

But then another voice rose above the clamor of the crowd. Longtail had sprung to his paws and, rather than the compassion and respect Graypaw had seen him display for the elders, the pale tabby's muzzle was now twisted in a snarl of contempt.

"It's worse than that!" he growled. "Look at this cat's collar! He's a kittypet!"

A new murmur of surprise rippled through the assembled cats as they all seemed to notice the same thing Longtail had.

Oh dear, Graypaw thought. He had a bad feeling that he knew exactly what was going to happen next. *This can't be good.*

At least Longtail's words seemed to have finally convinced Rusty to stand up for himself. The young tom stood up slowly as well, making eye contact with the tabby from across the crowd.

"I'm not a kittypet," he hissed. Despite his best attempt to hide it, a

tremor still crept into his voice as he went on. "Not anymore. Yes, I once lived with Twolegs, but I haven't had any housefolk for moons now. If I did, why would I be here with you?"

Longtail didn't bother to answer the question. "Once a kittypet, always a kittypet. A true cat—a true warrior—would have rejected that sort of soft life to begin with. And who's to say you're not only here *because* you have no Twolegs anymore? This Clan needs wild-born warriors to defend it, not another needy mouth to feed."

Lionheart, who had been watching the exchange from nearby, stepped closer to Rusty to whisper in his ear. "Longtail can smell your fear, and he surely isn't alone in that. You will have to prove to him and all these cats that that fear won't hold you back."

But despite the golden tabby's words, Rusty remained rooted to the dirt beneath his paws.

Goldenflower spoke up next. "Longtail is right! Surely no true cat would ever allow himself to be kept as a pet. And no cat who isn't a true cat could ever be a true warrior. Remember Pinestar!"

Graypaw's shoulders slumped as he watched the confrontation playing out. He knew the story of Pinestar, who had been ThunderClan's leader when Bluestar had been born, and he had suspected that some cat would have brought it up sooner or later.

Meanwhile, Rusty was still silent, apparently uncertain of what he should do. Longtail took the opportunity to carry on taunting him.

"As if your pelt didn't already make you stand out, that collar certainly will! The noisy jingling from it will fill the entire forest. At best, it will make you a poor hunter, and at worst, it will bring all the Twolegs in Twolegplace down upon us, searching for the poor lost kit and his pitiful tinkling. And if the noise of your bell doesn't alert them, your Twoleg stench will still scare off our prey and attract our enemies!"

Emboldened by Longtail's words, a few cats yowled their agreement. Bluestar had to hold up her tail for silence before the clearing became quiet again.

"Calm yourself, Longtail," she warned. "This cat has requested a place with us, and I have given him a chance to prove his worth."

"Then let him do it here and now!" Longtail urged her. "Surely, Bluestar, you can see how having him here might hold us back. If he is really committed to a life in this Clan, he needs to know what is at stake, for him and for us."

Bluestar looked to Lionheart, and to Whitestorm beside him, then to Rusty, then back to Longtail. "This is highly unusual," she mewed slowly. "But at the same time, it is highly unusual for a cat who is not Clanborn to join us in our camp. Perhaps a test is in order, if only to quell your worries."

Her gaze settled on Rusty again. "Well? Will you back down from a challenge?"

The ginger tom hesitated for several long moments, and Graypaw started to wonder if he really would refuse. But then he looked back at Bluestar and dipped his head. Then, almost before any other cat could react, he narrowed his eyes and, with a hiss of defiance, leaped at Longtail from across the clearing.

The rest of the Clan hastily scrambled out of the way as Rusty landed almost on top of the tabby warrior. Longtail, startled by Rusty's sudden assault, tried to dodge out of the way. His hind paws slid out from under him, and Rusty lashed out at the tabby warrior's flank with unsheathed claws before sinking his teeth into Longtail's scruff.

Unfortunately for him, Longtail recovered quickly. He threw Rusty off him, then struck out at the young tom as he briefly lay winded on the ground. Rusty fought back, and he and Longtail quickly found themselves rolling back and forth across the camp clearing in a tangle of fur and paws and claws.

As Graypaw watched the fight, he was reminded of his own first encounter with Rusty. He knew that, even if the ginger tom didn't like to start fights, he would defend himself fiercely if he was pushed into it.

But then, as he looked closer, Graypaw realized how much larger and better fed Longtail was than Rusty. The tabby tom hadn't had his warrior name for more than a few seasons, but he had been trained by Darkstripe, who was well known in the Clan for being crafty and cunning. Even if he didn't overpower Rusty by his sheer skill or size, Longtail's mentor would surely have taught him how to win a fight with tricks.

What was Bluestar thinking? Graypaw wondered. *This is hardly a fair challenge at all, even if this sort of thing was normal. Why doesn't some cat stop them?*

He thought about intervening himself for a moment, but he knew no cat would listen to him. He glanced around and saw Bluestar, Lionheart, and Whitestorm all watching the fight intently. They were the seniormost warriors in the Clan, weren't they? He had to trust them. If the challenge became too dangerous, one of them would speak up.

At last, thankfully, Graypaw saw the fighting toms come to a standstill in front of the Highrock. Before Rusty could get to his paws, though, Longtail pinned him to the ground with his forepaws on Rusty's shoulders, and Graypaw started to realize with dread that maybe their fight wasn't over after all.

Longtail leaned his head down to bite into Rusty's scruff, but as he tried to pull away, Graypaw saw that he had the younger cat's collar gripped between his teeth. The collar had already looked too small for Rusty before, but now, with Longtail pulling on it, it would surely choke Rusty if Longtail didn't let go.

That can't be fair! Graypaw looked to Lionheart, silently urging his mentor to do something, but no cat moved.

Rusty began to writhe violently from one side to the other, trying to shake Longtail off, but he couldn't make the bigger cat let go of him. His eyes went wide with panic, and he began retching and gasping for air. For all his movements, however, he only seemed to be making his struggle worse, and he slowly started to tire himself out.

"Yield, kittypet!" Longtail grunted, his voice muffled by the collar. "You'll never make it as one of us. You're much too puny-"

Suddenly, Rusty, who had been lying limply beneath Longtail's paws, gave one last massive jerk, almost as though the tabby warrior's final word had awakened something in him. Longtail, obviously surprised that his opponent could still have so much strength, stumbled backward and fell onto his side with a thud. Something snapped at the same time, and a moment later, Rusty's collar slid off of his neck as he rose to his paws, coughing and gulping as he caught his breath. The thin green strip of Twoleg material must have been ripped apart when Rusty and Longtail pulled away from each other.

Once he had recovered, Rusty spun around to glare at his tormentor, and Longtail glared back. Graypaw could see that Longtail had a freshly torn ear and Rusty had a cut above his eye, while both of them had had a few clumps of fur torn out. Clearly, neither cat's hostility had been fully spent, but Bluestar leapt down from the Highrock to stand between them before their fight could begin again.

Every cat remained silent as the Clan leader gingerly picked up Rusty's broken collar in her jaws and held it up for them all to see. She placed it back down on the ground before she spoke.

"Our newcomer has lost his collar in a battle for his honor. Clearly, StarClan has spoken their approval of him. He has been freed from the grip of Twolegs and his past life, and he is free to join ThunderClan as an apprentice." She looked to Rusty. "If that is still your wish?"

The ginger tom dipped his head, and as he did, the light of the sun sparkled off his orange pelt. "Yes, Bluestar. It is."

"Very well," Bluestar replied. "Then for now, we will welcome you into our camp. You fought well just now against Longtail, but you will still have a lot to prove if you want these cats to truly accept you. You will sleep in the same den as the other apprentices, and you will join them in their duties, but you will not have a mentor assigned to you yet. A moon from now, we shall assess your

progress, and if you have managed to keep up with your training, we shall proceed from there. Do you understand?"

Rusty nodded, and the sunlight caught his pelt all over again. Bluestar smiled almost ruefully to herself as she saw it.

"Your fur shines like fire in the sun," she said. "From this day forward, for as long as you are one of us, you shall be known as Firepaw." She spoke the words lightly, but also in a way that made Graypaw wonder if they had some deeper meaning behind them.

Ordinarily, whenever a cat became an apprentice, the Clan would yowl their name in welcome and congratulations. But with Firepaw, no cat really seemed sure of what to do. The warriors of ThunderClan glanced at each other awkwardly; clearly none of them wanted to be the first to speak up.

After several moments had gone by, Bluestar raised her tail to get the Clan's attention. "This meeting is at an end," she declared. "Firepaw, you can spend the rest of the day with the other apprentices and their mentors. They can help you begin to get to know our territory." She turned to Lionheart and Whitestorm. "I'll have to speak with Redtail and Tigerclaw later, but since you're both here, keep an eye on Firepaw. His fellow apprentices have been training for two moons by now, and he has a lot to learn if he wants to catch up."

The two toms dipped their heads in understanding, and Bluestar stalked off toward her den.

The rest of the Clan slowly began to disperse. Graypaw looked for Firepaw and found him still standing by his collar. The ginger tom halfheartedly kicked a cloud of dust over the Twoleg object like he was trying to bury his dirt, but he quickly turned away.

Noting the look of doubt and uncertainty on Firepaw's face, Graypaw walked over to join him. "Hey, Firepaw!" he called.

The other apprentice looked around him, seemingly confused. Then his gaze settled on Graypaw, and his expression brightened as he saw who was speaking to him.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Still not used to this new name. I didn't really expect to have one. There's so much here that's different from in the town."

"You'll get used to it," Graypaw told him warmly. "You held your own pretty well against Longtail, at least. That was a real dirty trick he tried to pull on you!"

Rusty's face darkened for a moment. "You're right about that. But no cat gets to call me puny. I had to deal with enough insults like that where I came from. It's part of why I'm here." He looked around. "Where is Longtail, anyway?"

Graypaw couldn't spot the tabby warrior anywhere either. "He must have slunk off to Spottedleaf's den. She's our medicine cat. She cares for all the cats in this Clan when they're hurt or sick. You should probably see her too, if you can. You don't want any of those scratches becoming infected."

Rusty shuddered as if he were reliving a bad memory. "Definitely not. That's how I lost my father."

"Oh," said Graypaw. "I'm sorry about that."

Rusty huffed out a breath. "It's fine. Not like you could do anything about it now."

"Fair enough," Graypaw replied. "But you have a Clan now. You don't have to just rely on yourself anymore."

"Maybe," Rusty mewed. "But we still don't know if I'll be able to stay." He waved his tail to indicate the rest of the Clan in the camp. "Not every cat here wants me around, after all."

By then, a few other cats had begun to move closer to Firepaw and size him up. A few of them called his name and offered tentative greetings, but the others simply stood back and watched him with interest. Still, Graypaw noticed that many of the Clan's cats had made no move to approach or welcome the new apprentice. Some of them, including Sandpaw and Dustpaw, were staring sconfully at him.

Whitestorm padded over to the two apprentices, while Lionheart stepped up to Firepaw. "Welcome, youngster," he mewed. "I see I wasn't wrong to tell Bluestar that you could survive here."

Rusty met the golden tabby's gaze. "Thank you, Lionheart."

"If you would like," Lionheart offered, "you can come hunting with me and Graypaw later, after you've had a chance to rest and have your wounds seen to. You can learn how to navigate our forest, and we can assess your skills at catching prey."

Rusty thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Sure. I'd like—"

He broke off as a loud yowl of alarm split the air. Graypaw scanned the camp for the cat who had cried out, and he saw one of the Clan's elders standing in front of the fallen tree that formed their den. His ears were flattened against his head, and his tail bushed out as he yowled another warning.

"What's going on?" Firepaw hissed. "Who's that?"

"Smallear," Graypaw replied. "One of our elders. He must smell trouble!"

His suspicions were confirmed a few heartbeats later as Ravenpaw raced into the camp. His black fur was ruffled and unkempt as if he had been moving quickly through undergrowth, and his eyes were wild with fear.

The same cats who had previously had all their attention on Firepaw suddenly shifted their focus to Ravenpaw. None of them moved or made a sound, but as Ravenpaw fought to catch his breath, the tension in the clearing only grew deeper.

"That's Ravenpaw," Graypaw murmured to Firepaw as he saw his friend's confusion. "He and his mentor, Tigerclaw, went out on a patrol to the Sunningrocks. We've been fighting with RiverClan over that pile of stones for moons, see. But you'll learn all about that soon enough."

"So why has Ravenpaw returned alone?" Firepaw whispered back. "Where's this Tigerclaw?"

Graypaw couldn't say. "I don't know. But the cat I'm really worried about is Redtail."

"Redtail?" Rusty repeated.

"Yeah," Graypaw replied. "He was leading the Sunningrocks patrol. If Ravenpaw's back here all alone, there must be trouble. Maybe we should—"

Across the clearing, Ravenpaw had just gotten his breath back. Graypaw let his voice trail off as he watched Bluestar racing over from the Highrock to stand in front of the black apprentice.

"Ravenpaw?" she asked. "What has happened? Where is the rest of your patrol?"

Even though Ravenpaw was no longer panting from the exertion of his run through the forest, Graypaw saw that he was still gasping for breath, as though he had news to share that he knew the Clan might not take well.

"Out with it," Bluestar ordered. "Where is Tigerclaw? Where is Redtail?"

"Redtail . . ." the apprentice rasped slowly, before his voice trailed off and his shoulders slumped again.

By now the other cats in the clearing had begun to move toward Ravenpaw, anticipation and concern mingling in their gazes. Several of them were whispering to one another. The elders had their head close together, as did Dustpaw and Sandpaw not far away. But before any other cat could do anything, Ravenpaw raised his head to the sky and let out a despairing wall.

"Redtail is dead!"